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VIOLET
1-250
Turning
터닝
쿠유 장편소설

Turning ( ) by Kuyu ( ). Volume 1 (Chapter 1-250)

Yuder was a commoner Omega who rose to the top with his ability.

When he woke up again after being falsely accused and executed, he was back 11 years ago before everything began.

A chance to get back…

He must not repeat the same mistake he did before.

To survive, and to save the world, now he had to save the man he had killed!

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Chapter 1

“Listen, criminal Yudrain Aile.”

An otherworldly voice echoed above his head.

“You are a criminal who forgot your duties and responsibilities as the commander of the cavalry, and dared to conspire with an absurd claim that you acted for the sake of the world. You trespassed into the forbidden sanctuary, attempting to steal the World Sphere. Do you acknowledge your involvement in the assassination of Duke of Peletta nine years ago, the destruction of the Pearl Tower seven years ago, the Red Field Rebellion five years ago, and countless other incidents that cannot be enumerated? When the truth was revealed, you shamelessly attempted to flee by joining forces with other countries.”

Yuder smirked bitterly to himself. The litany of accusations made him sound like a great criminal to be remembered in history.

Was there anyone present who truly wanted to know the truth, instead of just repeating predetermined answers?

What they wanted to believe was not the unsettling reality that the world might be on the brink of collapse, but rather that everything would be resolved if they killed the humble commoner-born, half-baked Omega who dared to conspire against them.

For years, Yuder had wandered the world, trying to find someone who would truly listen and believe him. Many signs indicated that something bad was about to happen in this world.

Even Yuder couldn’t fathom the magnitude of what was slowly approaching, but no one would listen to him.

Yuder, with his eccentric and sharp personality, had no family or connections and kept drifting from place to place. He was deemed mad and completely isolated.

Even now, he was alone.

If only he had gone when the neighboring empire had beckoned, perhaps he wouldn't have ended up like this. With his remaining eye, Yuder looked towards the imperial throne on the distant platform.

The emperor's seat was empty in his blurred vision. The emperor, who once whispered that he relied only on Yuder instead of his ministers, and ordered many tasks that couldn't be handled publicly, had turned his back on Yuder after his arrest.

Instead, a man stood beside the throne, wielding a black thorn-wood staff embedded with red magic stones.

Not long ago, that staff belonged to Yuder. The cavalry commander's uniform he wore, and even the authority to stand next to the throne, were all once Yuder's.

At one time, the man had been Yuder's subordinate. The person who once dared not even meet Yuder's eyes had now usurped his position. The way he held the staff was quite arrogant.

Who was there to blame now?

In retrospect, he had lost too much under the pretense of serving the greater good. He thought he would have no regrets even when facing death, but standing before it, he felt otherwise. Many things swirled chaotically in his mind.

The stubbornness and pride that had sustained him.

The countless tasks he still had to do.

The unanswered questions.

Those who had departed before him.

The future after his disappearance.

And… the face of someone he had forcibly suppressed all this time.

“…”

“There had never been anyone as wicked as this criminal in history. Despite committing a heinous crime of attempting to use the emperor’s trust and the entire empire for his benefit, the criminal showed no remorse. The emperor had fallen ill from the shock of elevating someone who knew neither honor nor responsibility to a position they did not deserve. Thus, a fitting punishment for the weight of his crimes was death, and today, at this very spot, he would be executed by beheading. Long live the emperor’s eternal blessings! That is all!”

A cheer rang out as flower petals filled the air. Yuder was dragged by the soldiers and raised onto the high altar.

Atop the altar, specially constructed for the execution of the high criminal, a massive guillotine with a gleaming blue blade was positioned so that everyone could witness the beheading.

Due to the prolonged torture, Yuder’s battered body slumped weakly beneath the blade. The unfamiliar pain, which he rarely felt while surrounded by the ever-obedient energy before the destruction of the mana hole, became unbearable to breathe. Yuder gasped for air as his vision blurred.

Ordinarily, criminals sentenced to death were given an opportunity to leave last words, but of course, Yuder was not granted

such a chance. Yuder looked up at the sky, which was so blue that it stung his eyes.

It was strange. He should have felt bitter enough to cry tears of blood, but he didn’t feel all that bad. The thought of soon being liberated from all these tedious affairs was even somewhat refreshing.

Indeed, what could be more ridiculous than worrying about the future when one was about to die and vanish?

It was they, not Yuder, who had ignored the bloodstained warning.

Ah, right. The truth was that he had been tired all along…

The moment he realized this, the blade fell from above.

Death was neither sweet nor painful.

—

Yuder was born in a small village in the corner of the Orr Empire.

Raised under the care of his great-grandfather after losing both parents, Yuder was left alone when his great-grandfather passed away when he was 13. From then on, he was responsible for himself, gathering and selling wood and medicinal herbs to make ends meet.

A change occurred in his life when he turned 18, after a massive Red Stone fell from the sky, astonishing the entire world.

Fortunately, the stone had landed in the middle of a mountain range in the central part of the Orr Empire where no one lived. In an instant, it turned the world upside down and filled it with a strange energy.

From that day on, some ordinary people began to awaken to strange powers. A child who had never held a sword could cleave rocks with a single branch, and an ordinary village maiden could kill an entire group of monsters attacking the village with a flick of her finger.

At the core of all these powers was the strange energy that filled the world when the Red Stone fell.

Unable to understand the situation, people believed that the energy that filled the world was a type of mana.

Mana had existed in the world before, but back then, only a very small number of talented individuals could feel and use it after a very long period of training. The difference now was that this mana was available to many more people.

There had been few in history, such as mages who had studied for decades in the tower or knights who could wield sword qi after arduous training, who belonged to that tiny minority.

However, those who had newly awakened their power did not have to exert any effort to use their abilities, regardless of age or gender. As they had been able to use their hands and feet from birth, so too were their powers.

People were greatly shocked by the fact that merely awakening their power enabled them to wield formidable strength from the outset.

As a result, the world’s structure, which had remained unchanged for over a thousand years, began to shift. A tense atmosphere hung between those who had held power and authority until then and those who had newly acquired their powers- the Awakeners.

As time went on and it was revealed that those with power could advance beyond their initial awakening level if they met certain

conditions, the tension only escalated.

Leaders of various countries were faced with the dilemma of how to handle these newly empowered individuals.

The Orr Empire, where Yuder had lived, was one of the places that had chosen to establish a new organization by gathering those with power through a nationwide announcement.

[All those with power, come to the capital where the Imperial Palace is located. If you can prove the truth of your power and swear to use it only for the empire and the emperor, you will be granted the right to join the Cavalry!]

The news spread like wildfire, reaching even the secluded mountain village where Yuder lived alone.

Yuder was among those who had gained strange powers after the fall of the Red Stone.

One day, he suddenly found himself able to cut trees without an axe. He could cross rivers without getting his feet wet. He could light fires in his stove without kindling and could attack beasts and monsters by moving stones with just a finger.

However, he never thought of showing off his powers to others. He had believed that he would live alone in the small cabin where he had spent his entire life with his grandfather.

But when he heard the news while selling wood in the market, his heart was moved. The Imperial Palace was gathering those with power – an opportunity that ordinary commoners could never dream of.

His grandfather had left a will advising him not to be greedy, but Yuder was still young at the time. To him, who had not yet outgrown

his boyishness, the announcement seemed like a chance for dazzling success and thrilling adventures.

He did not yet know that everything comes with a price, and that he was not well-suited for such pursuits.

Yuder packed his belongings and left his home. If he failed to join the Cavalry, he planned to return home immediately.

Thus, in the capital he visited for the first time, he struggled to find the shabbiest accommodation. In that lodging, which had a mismatched name like “Giant’s Sleep” and seemed to be on the verge of collapsing, Yuder, who should have been beheaded by the guillotine, opened his eyes again.

“…What on earth is going on?”

No matter how much he stared into the dirty, worn-out mirror, his reflection did not change at all. Yuder gazed strangely at his own image in the mirror.

A face that still held traces of youth. Dark hair that ominously covered his forehead. The neck that should have been severed was unblemished, without a single scratch.

The shoddy clothing hastily made from coarse fabric and the oversized shoes that made walking uncomfortable were all too real. Wherever he looked, he saw his appearance from eleven years ago, when he first left his home and came to the capital.

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Chapter 2

Could all that had happened until now have been just a dream? All the numerous events that occurred after joining the Cavalry, and even the sensation of the cold blade that ultimately slashed his throat?

If it were a dream, it would be a truly cruel nightmare. After all, it showed him the end of his future, starting from the very first day he arrived in the capital.

‘But the dream was too detailed and realistic…’

If it wasn’t a dream, then how should he interpret this situation? A fierce storm raged in Yuder’s mind.

Had someone cast a spell to send him back in time eleven years? Or was it the divine intervention of a god who took pity on his death?

Turning back time was something that not even the most powerful Awakener being could do. Gods often showed their power through their subjects, but there had never been a case of someone being saved from death and sent back in time.

However, if he had indeed gone back in time to eleven years ago, there would be plenty of opportunities for Yuder to correct his past regrets.

Yes, the future!

The very thing he thought he had lost forever. The moment he realized that, his hands trembled with elation and astonishment.

Now, he could do anything. Leaving this country and going elsewhere, rapidly increasing his power, and even not joining that annoying Cavalry – He could simply choose not to do any of it.

'…And maybe now, I can find out the true cause of the world's changes and stop them.'

Yes, it was not just about the cavalry. Yuder recalled the events that had haunted him until his death.

A few years later, fissures slowly began to appear in this world. Starting with the climate changing and disasters akin to calamities, divine power gradually became hidden.

Strange madness and distrust, which had never existed before, began to circulate among the people. There were countless other things that would happen.

Although Yuder alone couldn't solve these problems, many people were still alive and existed in this world. If he spoke to them and asked for their help in advance…

'No… Wait.'

His thoughts, which had been racing, came to a sudden halt. Yuder bowed his head, realizing the flaw in his thinking.

The previous Yuder had held a great deal of power and influence as the Cavalry commander of the Empire, but now he was nothing more than a young newcomer from the countryside. Who would actually listen to someone like that?

'No one would ever listen.'

The Cavalry was the first system established by the Orr Empire. It was possible because the previous emperor, no, the current

emperor, had shown a rather favorable attitude toward the Awakeners.

No matter how powerful he was now, it would be difficult to receive better treatment in any other country.

After the establishment of the Cavalry, it took a few years for other countries to begrudgingly realize that giving some power and status to the Awakeners was far better than oppressing them unconditionally.

And there were places where, although similar organizations were belatedly established, it was too late, and an irreversible rift had formed between the ruling class of the country and the Awakeners.

Such countries, unable to properly manage even their late-founded organizations, had plunged into the path of civil war.

As a result, the Orr Empire's Cavalry boasted a more powerful status and fame than any similar organization.

Yuder, the leader of the organization, was always the subject of admiration and envy wherever he went…

Yuder, recalling the past, briefly lowered his gaze to the ground. He didn't want to dwell on those times.

'Anyway, there's no better place than this now… And the most suitable people to help with the events that will happen in the future are here.'

Yuder knew that the magnitude of the power circulating in his body was not much different from when he had just awakened 13 years ago.

With this level of power, he could perform miracles that ordinary people couldn’t even dream of, but he was still no match for the archmages of the Pearl Tower, who had been digging a single path for a long time.

It was an unchanging truth that those with great power were less likely to listen to others. Yuder, who had experienced this firsthand, knew this better than anyone.

To persuade such people to find and prevent the cause of a disaster in the future that had not yet occurred, it required power and position.

‘Yes. Let’s join the Cavalry first. I can start the rest after meeting certain conditions.’

Yuder quickly accepted his reality and decided to dream of a better future than before. The reduction in the size of his power and returning as a commoner with nothing was not a hindrance to him.

He had regained an invaluable asset called time. The most important thing was that he had returned from his terrible future and was standing here now. That was all that mattered.

Yuder organized the information he remembered and thought about what he had to do in the future, spending days and nights locked up in the inn room.

It was the morning of the third day since he had realized that he had returned 11 years into the past that he finally stepped outside his room.

“Hey, the new guest who just checked in. The innkeeper said you also have ‘power,’ right?”

As he was going downstairs to wash his face, someone called out to Yuder from behind.

“Are you here to take the test at the Imperial Palace? Me too. It’s convenient to have a colleague to share information with, right? Shall we introduce ourselves?”

Turning his head, Yuder involuntarily widened his eyes. It was someone he knew. More precisely, it was someone from his past.

Red hair and striking green eyes typical of someone from the South. The flamboyant appearance that reminded one of a rose stood out.

Thanks to being a member of a once-prominent family, even though they had fallen, he had quickly become a well-known figure among those who had passed the Cavalry test with Yuder.

He remembered the man as having considerable talent, but after joining the Cavalry for just a year, he was dispatched to suppress a monster and ended up dying in an accident. Many had said it was a waste of talent…

“My name is Gakane Bolunwald. And you?”

Yes, that was his name. Yuder quietly opened his mouth while looking at the face of the man, as vividly shining as it was in his resurrected memories.

“Yuder.”

“Good, Yuder. I’m going to have breakfast now. What about you?”

Had he met Gakane here before? Yuder tried to recall. It had been 11 years, so his memory was hazy, but he was certain that they had crossed paths back then…

‘Ah, that’s right. We did.’

While preparing for the Cavalry test and staying in his room, Gakane had visited him once and greeted him with similar words.

At that time, Yuder had almost no experience interacting with strangers and had rejected Gakane outright. Gakane left, looking embarrassed, and they barely saw each other until Gakane died.

Back then, Yuder had disliked dealing with strangers, especially when he didn’t know when he would be returning home and what kind of ulterior motives they might have.

The first encounter with the huge capital had brought Yuder, who had lived alone in the quiet mountains, more discomfort and wariness than positive feelings.

However, looking back now, Yuder thought that Gakane might have been a pretty decent person. Despite knowing that Yuder was a commoner without a surname, Gakane didn’t show any disdain, and it wasn’t common for someone from a noble family to willingly stay in such a rundown inn.

This was something Yuder had failed to notice 11 years ago.

‘What was his ability again? I only remember that it was quite impressive, but I can’t recall the details.’

“Alright.”

Yuder decided to learn more about Gakane while having a meal with him. After all, Gakane was the first person he had met since returning to the past, and that held significance.

As they talked, the hazy memories of the past would become clearer.

“I’m thinking of ordering chicken stew and bread. What about you?”

Despite not knowing Yuder's age, Gakane spoke casually. Yuder, who was used to people cowering before him and unable to make eye contact, was quite impressed by Gakane's attitude.

"I'll have the same."

"Great. You won't regret it. Hey, we'd like to order!"

The dish Gakane ordered lived up to his promise and was quite delicious. It was impressive that the meal had such great taste, considering it was made from unknown ingredients in a rundown inn.

"How is it? Tasty, right?"

Gakane asked with a cheerful smile. Yuder nodded while scooping some stew into his mouth.

"It's been a long time since I've had something worth eating. I tried all the dishes here, and this combination is the best. They put a lot of meat in it, and the bread is freshly baked every morning, making it chewy. I'm glad to have found a companion."

It had been a very long time since he thought something was worth eating. It was an unfamiliar feeling.

"I'm from the southern region of Ulan. I came here a week ago. I was worried about making acquaintances before taking the test, but I'm glad I met you."

Gakane was quite sociable. After mentioning his hometown, he looked at Yuder with his green eyes, expecting an answer. Yuder felt uncomfortable keeping his mouth shut.

"I'm… from the central region."

"Central? Where? Quan? Bellec? Or maybe…?"

"Airic."

It had been a long time since Yuder had spoken the name of his hometown. If he were to pass the Cavalry test as he had in the past, the surname he would receive, ‘Aile,’ was derived from the name of his hometown.

Out of over 300 successful candidates, those without surnames were all granted one. However, most of the names were chosen without much thought. The depth of dedication differed between those names and ‘Yudrain,’ the name he had carefully chosen and received when he became the Cavalry Commander, which was similar to his original name.

‘There will be no need to receive that name again since I won’t become the Cavalry Commander this time.’

“Airic? Do you mean the place near the Rik Mountains?”

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Chapter 3

“Airic? Do you mean the place near the Rik Mountains?”

Gakane, who had no idea what Yuder was thinking, was merely surprised at the mention of his hometown’s name.

“You know it?”

“How could I not? The Rik Mountains is where the Red Stone fell!”

‘That’s right,’ Yuder chuckled. Although he hadn’t seen the scene where the Red Stone fell, as it was quite far from where he had lived, he had heard the sky turn completely red and the deafening sound that seemed to shake the heavens and the earth.

Back then, he didn’t know that the world wasn’t really coming to an end and was shocked by the event. In fact, the small village where Yuder used to sell timber was severely affected by the aftermath of the falling Red Stone.

“Did you, by any chance… see the Red Stone?”

Since he had only heard rumors about it, Gakane asked, unable to hide his curious expression. Yuder unknowingly nodded while recalling the past events.

“Really? You saw it?”

Gakane jumped excitedly, gasping for breath. His face turned red with excitement. Yuder realized he should have said that he hadn’t seen it 11 years ago, but he had already nodded his head.

“I heard that the Emperor’s knights have set up a camp to prevent anyone from entering the area, so how did you see it? Did it fall near where you lived? What did the stone look like? How big was it?”

“Wait a moment. I…”

Yuder hesitated for a moment, unsure of how to respond. Had he seen the Red Stone? Of course, he had. However, that was after he joined the Cavalry, which at this point was a future event.

That stone was collected personally by the then Cavalry leader after the establishment of the Cavalry, and afterward, the archmages of the Pearl Tower refined it, removing impurities for a year.

Since then, the stone had been called the “World Sphere,” a name given to it because it was said to possess the power to support the world.

His mood darkened as he thought about the stone, which had provided the crucial reason for his death.

“I didn’t get a good look at it. As you said… the knights were guarding it.”

“But you must have seen something, or you wouldn’t have said you saw it, right?”

Gakane was persistent, and his determination to hear the story was evident.

“If it has to be a secret, I promise I won’t tell anyone else. I swear on my sword, on the Holy War, on my mother’s name, whatever you want me to do.”

Had Gakane Bolunwald been such a person? Yuder felt his faint impression of Gakane crumble significantly.

No matter how dignified his appearance, he was still a young man unable to contain his curiosity. Yuder sighed softly and opened his mouth quietly.

“It’s not something worth hearing with such an oath.”

“If it’s not that great, you can tell me.”

‘You’re so persistent. You’ll learn about it after passing the Cavalry test anyway.’

After thinking that, Yuder recalled the fact that Gakane was already dead by the time the Red Stone had been collected and returned as the World Sphere.

Suddenly, he felt a faint sympathy for the young man before him, finding him a little pitiable. Hesitating, Yuder opened his mouth.

“It’s an ordinary stone. On the outside, it’s no different from any other stone in color or size, being only about the size of a fist.”

This much could be said without any problem. Gakane’s eyes widened at Yuder’s words.

“It’s that small? Then how can you tell it’s the Red Stone? I thought it was called the Red Stone because of its red color.”

Yuder faintly smiled without letting him notice. Everyone made the same mistake. Eleven years ago, Yuder had thought the same.

The Red Stone was named so because the whole sky turned red when it fell. And, since anyone could feel an extraordinary energy when they faced the stone, everyone knew its true nature immediately.

It was a stone that ordinary people couldn’t even approach due to being overwhelmed by its energy.

“I don’t know that.”

“Well, okay. I’m really curious. We’ll find out when we join the Cavalry, right?”

“…”

Yuder said nothing and ate his stew. Fortunately, Gakane seemed to not expect an answer to that question, and closed his mouth.

“Oh, right. Did you register for the test? You need to register to take the entrance test for the Cavalry. Do you know how?”

As the meal was ending, Gakane lifted his head as if he had just remembered. Yuder nodded.

“I know.”

He didn’t know back then. There had been no one to tell a poor country bumpkin with a gloomy expression about such details.

As a result, he only found out that the test required separate registration the day before it ended. The memory of getting lost in the vast capital while trying to find the registration place was still vivid.

“You need to go to the Blue Crown. It’s quite far from here when I went to register. It’s much more convenient to have me guide you than to get lost on the way. What do you think?”

Gakane’s expression was full of goodwill, perhaps because Yuder had informed him about the Red Stone. When had he last received such unconditional, pure goodwill? It felt incredibly awkward, but trying not to show it, Yuder stared at him.

“…Fine.”

“You made a good decision.”

Gakane smiled broadly. The dazzlingly handsome man even shone when he smiled. Yuder thought, after a long time, that the world was unfair.

—

The Blue Crown was not far from the Imperial Palace. It was mainly a place where administrators responsible for public affairs worked.

In truth, the building had a long official name, Parklamannuteia Hall, but there were several theories as to why it had acquired the somewhat peculiar nickname of Blue Crown.

One theory was that part of the roof was blue, while another suggested that the nickname came from the blue rose pattern drawn on the ground leading to the main entrance.

However, the most widely accepted explanation was that the ink used by the bureaucrats for their official seals was a distinctive shade of blue.

Standing in front of the grand building constructed in an old-fashioned style, Yuder was filled with mixed emotions. It was inside those doors that his life had changed for the first time.

“Fortunately, the line isn’t too long today. We should be able to get in quickly.”

Gakane, who had been looking at the people waiting in line, nodded and took the lead.

Those who had come to take the Cavalry test had to line up for registration. This was because, despite the large number of applicants, there were only a few registration officials.

Yuder had been fortunate enough to enter just before registration closed in the past, but this time was different. As they approached the end of the line, the woman standing right in front of them turned her head.

“Hello. Are you also applicants?”

With a seemingly angry, plump expression, her tone was as confrontational as her looks. Yuder didn’t recognize her from his memories. She was likely one of the many people who either had a weak ability that would be useless in real combat or had mistakenly come believing they had awakened an ability.

As this was the first Cavalry recruitment, there were countless such individuals. While Yuder would have ignored her question, Gakane kindly answered.

“Yes. Although I’ve already registered.”

“Really? Did you come to help the person next to you?”

“In a way.”

The woman’s gaze briefly shifted to Yuder standing next to Gakane before returning to Gakane.

“Then do you know what we should answer when we register? I’m so nervous that I haven’t been able to eat anything since this morning.”

Only then did Gakane realize that her tense expression was due to anxiety, and his gaze softened.

“It’s not a big deal. You just need to provide your name, age, place of origin, your secondary gender if you have one, and most importantly, a description of your ability. That’s it.”

The term “secondary gender” referred to a gender other than the visible male or female.

It was a trait that had emerged after the Red Stone had fallen, and since it manifested arbitrarily regardless of one’s primary gender, it was initially considered a divine curse.

However, as it was later revealed that this trait only appeared in those who had awakened their abilities, public perception changed.

The Emperor of the Orr Empire and the Pope officially declared it the “second gender bestowed by the gods,” and the general populace, who had been terrified that their own bodies might change at any moment, were greatly relieved.

Individuals with the alpha secondary gender, regardless of their primary gender, could impregnate those with the omega secondary gender. Although they could also form relationships with others and have offspring, those with secondary genders mostly felt sexual attraction only towards each other.

At first glance, this concise story seemed to involve little else. However, as time passed and more information came to light, new discrimination began to grow within these distinctions.

Those identified as alphas generally had exceptionally good physiques and tended to awaken strong abilities, earning the admiration of all. However, those identified as omegas had weaker abilities than even the average awakened individuals without a secondary gender.

Although both alphas and omegas experienced periodic mating cycles, the alphas’ cycles were relatively quiet compared to the omegas’. The omegas’ cycles were marked by the release of a powerful scent that even non-awakened individuals could detect, and they were often scorned for being unable to control their desires, as if they were beasts.

Many omegas, due to their scent, struggled to work effectively as ability users, and some were even kidnapped and used as sexual playthings by aristocrats who coveted rare and peculiar possessions.

By the time Yuder died, most ability users identified as omegas were unable to join the Cavalry. The reason for this was the discriminatory perception that, even if they were admitted, they would only end up being useless burdens on the organization.

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Chapter 4

Yuder had a second gender as well. He was an Omega. Until he passed the Cavalry test, it hadn't manifested, but it suddenly began to emerge after a few months.

There had been countless people over the years who looked down on Yuder, an Omega, for being the leader of the Cavalry. Among the Awakeners, there were many who refused to acknowledge him.

The reason they couldn't drive Yuder out openly was because he possessed a strength greater than any Alpha, and he was the only scentless Omega who didn't experience a heat cycle.

However, Yuder was the only one with such power, so despite his best efforts, he couldn't prevent discrimination and crimes against Omegas.

'Will it manifest at the same time as it did before?'

Those who hadn't awakened their second gender couldn't detect the second gender of others. Hence, Yuder couldn't tell whether Gakane and the woman he was conversing with, had manifested their second gender or not.

"Um… do we have to demonstrate our abilities while explaining them?"

"It doesn't seem like we have to."

Although they couldn't be sure, the woman's expression became more serious as she listened to Gakane's words.

"This is a big problem…"

“Why is that?”

“My ability… well, it requires some preparation. The results aren’t immediately visible either.”

“Is there such an ability? I’ve heard that most abilities are visible, like magic or swordsmanship.”

Gakane tilted his head, but Yuder had no doubt in her words. It was an obscure fact that among the initial Awakeners, there were few with unique abilities, but there were various types of abilities out there.

In a few years, the number of Awakeners would increase, and more people with diverse abilities would appear. However, such ability users were very rare, and since they usually didn’t have the ability to protect their bodies, they often died quickly.

If she was a proper ability user but encountered an official who didn’t understand her ability, she might have been denied the application altogether. Yuder suddenly found himself interested in the woman.

“What is your ability?”

Startled by Yuder’s sudden question, the woman turned her head. She hesitated but eventually answered obediently.

“I can read the information of whatever I touch.”

“Information? How is that possible?”

“Well, for example, when I hold an object, information about it suddenly enters my head. If it’s a book, I’d know who wrote it and what the contents are. But it’s not always possible, only when there’s significant information to read. There’s hardly anything to read about newly created objects. And the older and more information-rich

something is, the longer it takes. That's about all I've figured out so far."

"Wow."

Gakane's mouth fell open, his expression a mixture of belief and doubt.

"Can you read people too?"

"I've never succeeded in that."

'It's true.'

Yuder could read sincerity in her eyes.

'But words can be fabricated. It's the perfect ability to be labeled a liar. She probably couldn't even apply and was rejected in the past.'

An ability to read the information of objects she touched. At first glance, it was hard to grasp how extraordinary that ability was.

But what if that ability could evolve beyond its current level? What if it could read people, nature, and eventually even things that were invisible to the eye?

'Everyone would desire it.'

It could become more than just impressive; it could be a terrifying weapon. Depending on who wielded it, it could have the power to kill or save people.

As Yuder considered this, he suddenly recalled some information he had briefly heard and forgotten about in the past.

'Come to think of it, a few years ago… there were rumors that the king of Duvern had obtained an Awakener who could read the

future.’

Duvern was a vassal state of the Orr Empire, sharing a western border with it. Because of the king’s claims of having an Awakener who could read the future, Yuder, who had been anxious about the increasingly darkening world situation, had sent a member of his Cavalry to investigate.

However, the only information the returned member reported was that the Awakener who could read the future had died, entangled in Duvern’s political strife, and that the Awakener’s origin was the Orr Empire.

At that time, Yuder had thought that if there really was an Awakener who could read the future, they wouldn’t have died so meaninglessly, and he had dismissed the information as false and forgotten about it.

But if there was someone like the woman in front of him who could read an object’s information, perhaps there had really been such a person.

Perhaps she could only read the past at the moment, but if her ability developed, it might even become possible for her to read the future.

Yuder needed information. He needed far more information than what his past self knew. To do that, it was necessary for people with abilities like the woman in front of him to join the Cavalry.

Yuder glanced at how many people were left in the line. There were still about seven. That was enough time.

As he rummaged through his pocket, he found something familiar. When Yuder pulled out an old bracelet from his pocket, both the woman and Gakane looked at him in surprise.

“Why that?”

“Read this.”

The woman hesitated as she took the abruptly offered bracelet.

“Me? But I told you, my ability doesn’t work on everything… Huh?”

The woman, who had been speaking, suddenly stopped. Yuder saw the aura-like energy emanating from her entire body. That confirmed it. She was indeed an Awakener with the power of the Red Stone.

“The person who made this was an old man. Your grandfather?”

“That’s right.”

“I see. About seven years ago… you received it just before he passed away. Yu…der. Yuder? Is that your name?”

Instead of answering, Yuder just faintly raised the corner of his mouth.

“Your ability is real.”

“I told you so.”

“But the officials probably won’t believe it.”

At Yuder’s cold remark, the woman’s expression hardened. Gakane opened his mouth as if to say it was unfair. Yuder quickly continued before they could react.

“So, when they ask you to explain your ability, don’t tell them what you told us. Just say it’s an ability with tremendous destructive power.”

“What?”

“What are you talking about?”

The man and woman tilted their heads in unison.

“The officials only accept the applications. They won’t bother to test abilities that seem difficult to verify indoors. In fact, depending on how you use the information you’ve read, it could be an excellent ability to destroy enemies, so it’s not a lie. When you actually take the test, just tell the examiners about your ability properly and ask them to bring you an old object to verify your ability. For now, let’s just make sure you successfully submit your application. If you don’t even apply, you won’t have any further opportunities.”

Yuder’s voice was almost monotonous and incredibly calm. However, the content of his words, spoken in such a composed tone, contained a sharpness no one had expected.

It might have been a trick, but it wasn’t a lie. Gakane and the girl both felt a similar sense of wonder at Yuder, who seemed to know the test process very well, but soon, amazement took over.

“Wow, that’s amazing. Can we really do that?”

“It depends on how badly you want to join the Cavalry.”

Yuder would never have said such a thing in the past. But having gone through the same process as them, becoming a member of the Cavalry, witnessing all the world’s irrationality, and then coming back from the dead, his perspective had changed.

To Yuder now, Gakane and the girl felt like very young, newly Awakeners of the Cavalry that he needed to take responsibility for. They were people whose future he couldn’t predict, so they still had potential.

His kindness was born out of necessity, but on the other hand, he felt a bit bitter that he hadn't completely escaped the mindset of a Cavalry commander.

"Well, you're right. The officials are just the registrars, not the examiners. If we can't even submit our applications, we won't have any more chances."

Gakane patted Yuder's shoulder with an admiring expression. The girl appeared lost in thought for a moment before nodding her head as if making up her mind.

"I'll do that. Thank you for the advice. I didn't introduce myself earlier. My name is Kanna."

"As you read earlier, this guy is Yuder, and I'm Gakane Bolunwald. I hope we all successfully apply and get accepted into the Cavalry, and meet again."

At Gakane's words, Kanna smiled, her face visibly more relaxed.

"That would be nice. Even if it's just talk."

"Next, please come in."

Finally, a voice called Kanna's turn. Suddenly, there was no one else in front of them. Kanna took a deep breath, waved her hand in farewell, and entered. The entrance and exit were designed separately, so they couldn't know if they would see her again.

If she succeeded in applying, they might meet in the test hall or the Cavalry if she was lucky; if not, they wouldn't see her again.

"Yuder, aren't you nervous?"

Gakane asked Yuder, who was thinking about a better way to stay in touch with Kanna later, with a strange expression on his face.

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Chapter 5

“I was actually quite nervous.”

“…Not me. I’m fine.”

He had already experienced it once, and the result was obvious. Why would he be nervous? However, he couldn’t say that, so he held his tongue.

“You’re a really unpredictable person. More than anyone I’ve seen… I think you’d pass the Cavalry test right away.”

“Yeah. That’s right. I’ll pass.”

At Yuder’s response, Gakane showed a momentarily dumbfounded expression. Then, he couldn’t help but burst into laughter.

“Pffft. What’s that? Do you have the ability to see the future? Then what about me? What do you think I’ll be like?”

“I don’t have the ability to see the future, but I think you’ll pass as well.”

Gakane laughed even louder.

“Gosh, saying such pleasant things with that expression. Thanks.”

Although he thought Yuder’s words were empty, Yuder was actually telling the truth. Gakane would definitely pass and join the Cavalry.

He wanted to say something more to Yuder, but a voice called Yuder from inside, so he couldn't.

"Alright. Go register. I'll wait for you by the exit."

Yuder wanted to tell him not to wait, but Gakane turned away more quickly. Yuder entered the Blue Crown. The registration would be over soon. The important thing was the test that would take place after registration.

—

Due to the large number of people wanting to join the Cavalry, the tests were not all held on the same day. The tests were conducted over three days within the Imperial Knight's compound for those who had completed registration, and the results were determined immediately after the tests were finished.

Yuder was scheduled to take the test on the last day, while Gakane took the test on the day before.

Judging by his absence from the inn, Gakane had passed, just as before. Yuder, carrying a simple bag on his shoulder, left the inn.

The Imperial Knight's compound, where the tests were held, was not far from the inn. The training ground within the compound, surrounded by several tall buildings, was the location for the Cavalry's entrance exam.

Yuder noticed some familiar faces among the tense expressions of the people circling the buildings. They were the faces of those who would pass the tests.

"Number 423, it's your turn!"

Many people were called into the building. Now it was Yuder's turn. He leisurely walked into the building, which was unchanged

from his memories.

Though now the test was barely held by borrowing one of the Imperial Knight's training grounds, a few years later, the positions of the Imperial Knights and the Cavalry would be completely reversed.

Ordinary people, who made up most of the knights, could not beat the Awakeners with innate talents. The Cavalry, gaining the emperor's trust, thrived and eventually took over half of the buildings that once belonged to the Imperial Knights, as well as half of the newly built buildings, displaying their prestige.

"Number 423."

Following the guide into the examination room, Yuder faced the five examiners. He hadn't known in the past, but now he could recognize most of their positions. From the left, they were the deputy commander of the Imperial Knights, the assistant of Chancellor Mooker, the representative mage sent from the Pearl Tower, a court mage, and…

Upon seeing the man sitting on the far right, Yuder's eyes changed. Unlike the others, the man wore plain clothes with no discernible features indicating his position, giving off an ordinary impression.

The other participants didn't seem to notice anything unusual about the man, but Yuder was different.

The man's face was an elaborate fake, meticulously crafted with magic. Yuder had seen that deliberately plain face a long time ago, designed not to be remembered.

'Could it be that face?'

"Number 423. You wrote quite an impressive description in the ability section, is it all true?"

Yuder’s attention remained on the man on the right when a sharp question snapped him out of it. The mage of the Pearl Tower was shaking Yuder’s application form, his face deeply furrowed.

“You can imbue a sword with both fire and water? In my entire life, I’ve never heard such a preposterous claim.”

They had said the same thing about Yuder’s application in the past. He had been angered back then, but not anymore. He fully understood why they reacted that way.

Before the Awakeners appeared, magic was something very difficult to master; one could barely accumulate mana in their body after rigorous training and use it through a complicated process. Using magic even once was extremely cautious and challenging.

As a result, most mages delved into mastering only one type of magic, the easiest to use, to achieve success quickly.

Fire magic users focused solely on fire magic, while water magic users focused solely on water magic – this had become a standard practice for over a thousand years.

Learning magic of different attributes simultaneously took too long to become accustomed to manipulating mana, and more importantly, the mana accumulated in the body could clash, posing a severe risk.

Thus, a mage using more than one type of magic was almost considered a far-fetched story found only in novels.

Of course, that was the story before the Awakeners appeared.

Among those who had awakened with the power of the Red Stone, many could handle multiple attributes of magic in various ways. While their proficiency and power varied greatly, it was undoubtedly a phenomenon that shattered existing common sense.

Among them, Yuder was the best of the best. He could freely manipulate all attributes, imbuing any weapon he touched with his power, making it even stronger. Imbuing a sword with attributes was nothing to him.

‘In truth, even reporting that I can only handle fire and water is an understatement.’

In the past, he had merely claimed to be able to handle attributes but had not mentioned imbuing them into a sword. It was only after several advancements that he discovered his ability to imbue weapons with attributes.

If he had reported his full powers, no one would have believed him, and he would have been disqualified at the application stage. Some reduction was necessary, but he did not want to follow the same path as before.

The result of his dilemma was this. Yuder believed that by showing this level of skill, it would be easier for him to achieve his goal by immediately standing out after being accepted into the Cavalry.

As Yuder showed no reaction to the mage’s anger, the deputy commander of the Imperial Knights, who had been sitting to the left, stroked his beard and spoke up.

“Arguing amongst ourselves won’t get us anywhere before we see it for ourselves, will it? So, if what you say is true, show us. Make us believe, convincingly.”

“I understand.”

Yuder looked around. The test rules prohibited bringing personal weapons, so he was empty-handed. However, not far away, there were a few blunt practice swords and tools provided for the test takers. Without hesitation, he walked over and picked up a sword.

“Hmm.”

Though it was a practice sword, it was so heavy that an ordinary person would never be able to hold it. The examiners’ expressions changed as Yuder, whose arm didn’t seem particularly muscular, lifted the sword as if it were a mere branch.

Getting the reaction he had hoped for, Yuder stood with the sword in a place where the examiners could see him well. He could hold the sword lightly because he was an ability user who could manipulate the forces of nature at will.

Not only the five main elements, but anything that came from nature could be moved by Yuder as if it were his own limb. Most weapons were made of iron, so it was only natural.

As a result, when he was captured and tortured, he had been disassembled, first by piercing the mana hole beneath his navel, the most significant weak point and vital spot for an Awakener to use their power.

Even when he was about to die, his arms and legs were crushed, and he was tied up with ropes made from monster tendons, which were not natural existences.

Yet, he survived until the day of his execution, simply because he was an Awakener, nothing more, nothing less.

But now, Yuder’s mana hole was perfectly fine, and his physical condition was excellent. The people in front of him still didn’t know what an Awakener was capable of.

They merely watched, not knowing what Yuder could do with the blunt practice sword he held.

‘Of course, I only plan to show them an appropriate level of skill for now…’

He had no desire to waste time in the world he had finally returned to. Yuder wanted to pass the test by leaving a good impression on the examiners, while also not showing his full strength.

As he thought this far, Yuder's gaze briefly drifted back to the man sitting on the far right, wearing the ordinary fake face.

"…I'll begin now."

Yuder raised the sword. As the examiners' gazes were all fixed on the tip of the sword, he slowly gathered energy. Although it felt like a long time since he had last done this, the method was as natural as breathing and imprinted in his mind, so he wasn't confused at all.

He grasped the energy flowing around him. Then, he wished to transform it into fire and applied it to the tip of the sword he was holding. It was challenging to explain how natural it was for Yuder, but that was roughly the process.

In an instant, the blade was enveloped in flames, making a crackling sound. The heat was much hotter and redder than usual, so the examiners could feel that it was genuine fire.

Yuder slowly swung the sword down from top to bottom. It might have looked simple, but the power behind it was far from insignificant.

As sparks fell with the sound of the wind being cut, several examiners jumped in surprise, retreating backward in their chairs.

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Chapter 6

“Whooa.”

It was an act that made them forget their dignity, but no one could blame them. The sight was that astonishing.

Next was water. Yuder changed the energy surrounding the sword. Then, the fire melted and in an instant, a swirling stream of water wrapped around the entire blade.

A sound similar to a whirlwind echoed faintly throughout the room.

Holding the sword, Yuder swung it around several times and then slowly advanced.

“I’ll demonstrate only this much and prove that this is real water. Does anyone want to touch it?”

Yuder watched as the examiners hesitated between preserving their dignity and fear. People are always afraid of what they haven’t seen before.

They might have seen swordmasters who envelop their swords with energy and archmages who wield elemental magic before, but when the two were combined, even something familiar suddenly felt strange.

The examiners were all speechless. No one dared to volunteer. Just as Yuder was about to withdraw the sword, the examiner seated at the far right spoke up for the first time. It was the man wearing a magically altered face.

“If no one else will, I’ll do it.”

“No, you mustn’t. Your…!”

In that instant, the deputy commander of the Imperial Knights cried out in alarm, then quickly closed his mouth.

‘Hmm. It seems my guess was correct.’

Although the deputy commander had barely managed to restrain himself from revealing the examiner’s identity, his reaction only served to further confirm Yuder’s suspicions.

“It’s okay, don’t worry. I’m ‘that one,’ aren’t I?”

The examiner seated at the far right grinned at the person trying to stop him, looking completely relaxed.

If someone other than Yuder had been present, they would have been unable to guess why this examiner seemed so carefree.

The deputy commander of the Imperial Knights appeared to want to say something, but in the end, he just sighed and lowered his head.

“Please, do as you wish.”

“Well, I intend to. Something interesting has finally come along, hasn’t it?”

The man who fearlessly reached out to touch the water-encased sword and the one trying to stop him might have appeared insignificant if not for the fact that one of them was the deputy commander of the Imperial Knights. To those who knew, the situation held a different meaning.

The Imperial Knights were mostly composed of high-ranking nobles. Only those born into families that had served the imperial family for generations and had practiced diligently with the sword

since childhood could pass the difficult exams and ascend to the highest ranks.

Naturally, promotions only occurred when one demonstrated both skill and noble lineage. To have risen to the rank of deputy commander in the Imperial Knights meant the person came from a family of at least the rank of count.

So, who was the one person before whom these individuals bowed and retreated? The answer was simple. It was the royal family, the bloodline of the Sun God, who were said to be born with the power of light.

Royals were born with striking appearances, golden hair like light, and red eyes. The examiner before him must have used magic to disguise his appearance and hide these distinctive features.

In the world, there existed a transformative magic that was created for use in such situations. Of course, it was a very difficult magic, so there were more cases where one couldn't see someone who had changed their appearance using it. However, Yuder had once known a member of the royal family who could freely wield that magic.

That mysterious royal, who frequently changed his appearance, Yuder didn't know all of his disguises, but he was sure of a few. One of them looked exactly like the examiner before him.

'If I had never seen that face before, it would have been difficult for me to guess it, no matter who I was. It's been a long time since I've seen it, but it's really sophisticated magic.'

That person was none other than Yuder's predecessor, the first commander of the Cavalry, Duke of Peletta Kishiar La Orr.

Among the numerous charges Yuder faced just before his execution, there was also the charge of killing him. The case of Duke

of Peletta’s murder had been one of the biggest suspicions surrounding Yuder for a long time. It was also the only case that he had left as a burden on his own conscience.

That’s because Yuder was indeed the one who had taken his life. It was the first mission he had carried out, upon receiving the emperor’s secret order…

To think he would meet the man he had killed so soon again. He had thought that if he joined the Cavalry, he would have to face him first, but he never thought he would be here as one fo the examiners.

Yuder, trying to suppress his complicated feelings, offered his sword to the man who had stood up from his seat.

“Please touch only the water surrounding the blade, not the blade itself.”

He had been polite, but his tone was somewhat arrogant, as he had suppressed his emotions too much. The examiner seemed to think so too, as he shot him looks that seemed to say, “What kind of crazy thing is this commoner doing?” However, Yuder just stood there unabashedly.

If the man Yuder knew was indeed him, he would never get angry at this level. If anything, he might find it amusing…

“Hahaha. How interesting.”

Yes, just like that.

As Yuder felt an odd sensation, the man reached out without hesitation. He hadn’t noticed it while sitting, but once he stood up straight, he was taller than anyone else in the room.

While transformative magic could change one’s facial features, it was difficult to alter one’s physique. Yuder became more confident in

his guess about the man’s true identity.

Despite his size, the man’s movements were not sluggish in the slightest, and they were surprisingly leisurely and elegant, even with a sword as big as Yuder’s, which looked like a toy in comparison.

The moment the man’s fingers touched the stream of water swirling around the sword, the examiners collectively shuddered.

“…”

And the water that touched his hand rippled like ordinary water, splashing forcefully in all directions. Water quickly stained both Yuder’s face and the man’s hand and clothes.

“It’s real water.”

“As I said.”

“How dare you…!”

One of them couldn’t hold back from blurting out, unable to bear listening to Yuder’s words. The man in front of him raised a hand and squinted and he quickly closed his mouth. Yuder looked directly into the eyes of the man, who seemed to find him interesting as he looked down at him.

Red pupils, like genuine jewels hidden behind a mask of ordinariness.

The sight of those red eyes, which he thought he had eradicated forever with my own hands, shining vividly before him, felt both unfamiliar and strange. Had he felt this way when he first saw him in the past? He wasn’t sure. He couldn’t remember.

“Interesting. Impressive ability. Fearless too, considering your power.”

“Would I fail if I had no fear?”

Yuder ignored his words and only said what he had to. The man listened to Yuder and gently smiled, the corners of his lips curling upward.

“No, of course not. We can’t miss out on talent like this.”

“Thank you.”

Yuder withdrew his energy from the sword. Now, all that was left was to head to the lodging where the successful candidates would stay.

“Number 423.”

However, just before exiting through the door, someone called out to Yuder from behind. The man with the red eyes was smiling.

“I’ll remember you. See you again.”

Of course, they would meet again. After all, he was the commander now.

Yuder felt regret that he couldn’t respond to the man’s words as he pushed the door open and went outside.

—

The number of Awakeners who passed the first-ever recruitment after the establishment of the Cavalry was 330. It was a remarkably large number, but it was a natural occurrence since it was the first recruitment.

During the first round of recruitment, they didn’t yet know how to classify those who had awakened their powers or what kind of people were needed for the Cavalry. The information about the Awakeners themselves was also woefully inadequate.

However, after accumulating more information and experiencing trial and error, the number of successful candidates decreased significantly from the second recruitment onwards.

Eventually, even though they had set up a system for continuous recruitment and testing of specialized personnel, the number of successful candidates dwindled to the point where not even one person passed in a month.

But all that was a matter of the distant future. The faces of the first successful candidates were a mix of joy and nervousness as they all gathered in the huge indoor training arena. That was the only place where a group of 330 people could gather at once.

“The commander will be here soon. Everyone, maintain your formation and stand at attention.”

Managing them was not the Awakeners but the Imperial Knights. It was a newly formed group with no structure, so it couldn’t be helped.

The knights couldn’t help but cast disdainful glances at the assembled Cavalry members. In their eyes, the Awakeners were nothing more than mysterious, lowly people of no clear identity.

Most of the newly accepted Cavalry members were intimidated by those glares, but there were also brave ones who brushed them off with a snicker.

“Look at those gazes. They would die instantly if I waved my hand.”

“Right? They look like they’d die after taking only five blows from my sword, but they act all superior because they’re nobles.”

“Weak and repulsive.”

“They don’t know their place.”

The blue-haired man and woman whispered so loudly that it seemed as if they wanted the others to hear. The stern-faced knight, holding his spear, turned beet red. He gritted his teeth, but he couldn’t say anything due to the situation.

Seeing this, the new members who had been intimidated regained some of their confidence. It was the same scene Yuder had witnessed in the past.

‘Hinn and Finn siblings. They were quite famous.’

The blue-haired twins were distinctive for their rumored ancestry, which included fairy blood from their family lineage. They possessed exceptional beauty and remarkable abilities, but their overly unrestrained personalities earned them the dislike of their superiors.

Eventually, they were said to have left the Cavalry after only a few years and returned to their hometown.

Contrary to their seemingly delicate appearance, as if they couldn’t even pluck a flower, they possessed an impressive physical enhancement ability that left a lasting impression on Yuder’s memory.

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Chapter 7

As the atmosphere became somewhat relaxed, everyone naturally aligned themselves into rows. Yuder spotted a distinctive red hair not too far away. It was Gakane.

He hadn’t noticed Yuder yet, but it was slightly amusing to see him constantly looking around as if searching for something.

“The commander is entering. Everyone stand straight.”

Finally, someone stood on the prepared platform at the front of the training ground amidst the noise outside. A few knights followed him in, as if escorting him, but only one stood on the platform.

The tall man with shining blonde hair, red eyes, and white uniform instantly captivated everyone’s attention. Just his presence alone made it feel as if everything around had lost its light.

“Nice to meet you all. I am Duke Pelleta, Kishiar La Orr.”

A man whose very existence was like the sun itself. That was the true face of Kishiar La Orr without using transformation magic.

All 330 members of the Cavalry Corps and the Imperial Knights could not take their eyes off Kishiar. He glanced around lightly as if to confirm that everyone was looking at him.

Yuder saw his red eyes flicker ever so slightly when their eyes met, but he didn’t show any reaction.

“As you can see, I am a member of the imperial family born with the power of light and a duke at the same time. But does that matter to you? …No. It doesn’t mean anything here.”

Kishiar’s soft voice echoed through the space, making it feel as if it was bewitching. Only the Imperial Knights seemed confused and embarrassed.

“Here, I am merely one who has awakened by the power of the Red Stone, just like all of you. And I was chosen to represent you simply because I know His Majesty a little better. The spirit of the Cavalry is solely for the security and power of the Empire, and your own freedom. That should be enough. You may not understand the meaning now, but I hope you will realize it someday.”

“…”

Everyone fell silent at his declaration, which was more shocking than radical. Not even a breath could be heard.

“I’ll end my inaugural address here. You will temporarily reside on the Imperial Knights’ premises until the proper construction of the Cavalry’s exclusive building is complete. If you have any questions, feel free to visit the Cavalry commander’s office. That’s all.”

“Now, let’s greet the commander.”

Unable to hide their confusion, one of the Imperial Knights shouted. The inexperienced new recruits, who didn’t even have a proper way to salute yet, each gave their own individual greetings. The knights watched with a disgusted expression, sighing in disbelief.

Kishiar La Orr was the only one smiling there.

—

“The commander, huh? He’s quite an odd one.”

After the shocking inauguration ceremony, the Cavalry members were guided to a temporary housing building. They were divided into

groups of four based on gender, sharing a room together.

They had received a vague explanation that they would live like this until the division of tasks within the Cavalry was finalized, but no one complained.

That was because Kishiar's inaugural address had been so shocking, and their curiosity about meeting others with the same abilities for the first time in their lives was immense.

"Yuder! I knew you'd pass!"

Yuder finally spotted Gakane among the new recruits, running towards him like a puppy that had found its owner.

"I passed too. And so did Kanna. Have you seen her?"

Gakane's ability to quickly switch from formal to informal speech and become friendly was surprising. When Yuder shook his head, Gakane happily patted his back, saying he'd be able to greet her soon.

"It's amazing that all three of us passed. It must be thanks to your blessing. Which room are you in?"

"Um…"

Yuder glanced at the paper in his hand. His accommodation was in room 36 on the third floor of the building. Seeing this, Gakane let out a small cheer.

"We're in the same room! I wonder who the other two are?"

"Well, we'll find out when we get there."

Yuder didn't care who he shared a room with, but Gakane seemed to feel differently. He couldn't hide his excitement, having never shared a room with anyone like this before.

“It feels like we’ve really become knights. Living together, training together. Doesn’t it sound fun?”

“…”

‘Fun, huh…’

Yuder recalled the most difficult times in his memories. For about a month after he first joined the Cavalry, he was pushed to the brink of death. Back then, they hadn’t yet developed standardized training methods for each ability wielder.

Kishiar had rolled up his sleeves and experimented with the early recruits to create a system. Thanks to that, by the next recruitment round, the Cavalry had a somewhat structured organization.

Things probably wouldn’t be much different this time. Even if Yuder were in Kishiar’s position right now, he couldn’t think of a better way to establish the newly-formed Cavalry’ system.

He’d see if Gakane could still call it fun after a week.

Returning to the past wasn’t bad, but the thought of going through hellish training again wasn’t pleasant. After all, Yuder knew best how to develop his own abilities, and there were hardly any physical methods involved.

But he couldn’t explain that to Kishiar, so he just had to endure.

Sighing, Yuder arrived at their room to find two men who would share the room with them had already arrived.

“Are you two our roommates?”

A skinny, freckled man asked nervously. His name was Juan, and his ability allowed him to move at a speed that made him nearly invisible to the naked eye.

“I’m Juan. And that guy over there is Kurga.”

Yuder looked at Kurga, who was shamelessly lying on a bed. He looked more like a bear than a human.

In fact, his ability was to enlarge his body and maximize his combat abilities, so his appearance was fitting.

Although Yuder had seen both of them in passing and remembered their faces, they hadn’t had any real conversations due to their unremarkable skills.

There was a stark difference between Yuder, who had quickly become a leader shortly after joining the Cavalry, and the ordinary Awakeners.

In the past, Yuder didn’t have the leisure to pay attention to others with lesser abilities. Yuder’s focus had always been on becoming stronger and protecting his own body, and since strange signs appeared in the world, his focus shifted to discovering and stopping their cause.

But this time was different. He had learned through death that he couldn’t solve the problem alone, so he decided to broaden his attention to those around him and never become the leader of the Cavalry again.

“I’m Gakane. This is Yuder. I have the ability to summon my shadow whenever I want, and as for him… Come to think of it, Yuder, I didn’t know what your ability was.”

Yuder finally remembered the quite useful ability of Gakane Bolunwald, which he had thought of before.

‘Right. He could summon a doppelganger through his shadow, using it for communication or combat, and was highly rated for it.’

“I can imbue my sword with fire and water.”

“Fire and water? Both?”

“Quite impressive.”

The others widened their eyes at Yuder’s words. They would probably be more surprised if they knew he was capable of even more, but it wasn’t the time to reveal that.

“Alright. Let’s get along from now on.”

“Uh, yeah. Me too.”

After exchanging greetings, they divided the beds and areas to use. Many of them had anticipated group living before joining the Cavalry, so there were no conflicts.

‘It must be like a dream come true for commoners.’

Excluding Gakane, the other three who would be staying in this room were all commoners without surnames. For them, it must have been a very unfamiliar experience to live in a spacious room with four beds, clean bedding, and meals provided.

‘But they’ll get used to it soon.’

Thus began Yuder’s second experience in the Cavalry.

—

Of the 330 Cavalry members, just over 200 were without surnames.

This meant that more than half of them were illiterate. Before the Red Stone fell, they wouldn’t even have crossed paths with those who had surnames, but their fate had completely changed now.

Training facilities that only the Imperial Knights could use were now all occupied by the Cavalry. Every day, there were explosions of fire and broken equipment at the training grounds, but no one found it strange. It was only natural when those with abilities were together.

Commander Kishiar ordered the Cavalry members to undergo physical training, get accustomed to their power, develop their individual abilities, and even study letters simultaneously.

It was an incredibly demanding task, but knowing what a great privilege it was, everyone moved according to the training schedule with a do-or-die attitude.

As a result, after a few weeks, the Cavalry members achieved remarkable results at an astonishing speed. Of course, no one could catch up to Yuder, who did everything twice.

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Chapter 8

“Nothing much has changed from the past so far.”

Of course, Yuder’s roommate and Kanna’s acceptance had changed from the past, but the faces of those who had been roommates then were not memorable enough, and the addition of just Kanna did not affect the overall flow, so it did not matter.

The events happening in the Cavalry proceeded as Yuder knew them.

There were only minor incidents, such as the blue-haired twins engaging in a verbal fight with the passing knights or a brief commotion occurring during training due to someone causing a magical explosion.

“And soon, our lodging will change.”

They would move from the temporary residence in the Imperial Knight dormitory to the newly completed building dedicated to the Cavalry. That place had been Yuder’s true home for a long time before he was caught.

Although the Emperor had given him several houses after he was promoted, Yuder had never felt attached to them.

His real home had always been the small room in the top corner of the building where the Cavalry members stayed.

However, this time he wouldn’t be promoted, so he could never stay in that room.

Feeling strangely nostalgic for the place that had not even been built yet, Yuder exhaled softly.

“Yuder, surely you’re not tired already?”

Gakane, who had been training next to him, asked incredulously. He had become a famous figure within the Cavalry for his good looks and sociability, but he had never left Yuder’s side.

Moreover, he always initiated conversations with Yuder, regardless of whether Yuder responded. It was both amazing and strange to interact with him.

In fact, if one were to mention the most significant change since Yuder’s return, it would be his relationship with Gakane.

However, Gakane would die in an accident during a mission about a year later. The event that Yuder had once felt indifferent to now occasionally tormented his mind.

‘I intend to prevent the deaths of those with abilities, including Gakane Volunbalt’s, but…’

Could he do it? He hadn’t yet accomplished something significant enough to save someone destined to die. It was unknown whether his efforts would succeed or fail. The outcome of events that had not yet occurred could not be known.

“I’m fine.”

Yuder cleared his thoughts and stood up again.

“That’s right. That’s more like you.”

What did it mean to be like himself? Even though he had behaved the same way, no one had tried to make eye contact with Yuder in the past. However, the Gakane in front of him looked at him with an innocent gaze. It was both strange and peculiar.

—

A month passed, and the Cavalry members moved from their temporary lodgings to the new building made specifically for them. It was located right next to the Imperial Knights grounds.

The building had been designed with their training in mind, but the knights were furious that the Cavalry members, whom they despised like insects, had better accommodations than they did.

Yuder's roommate remained the same, but the room was much larger than before. When they lay down in their separate beds, their spaces were divided enough to be invisible to each other.

And so, as Yuder remembered, the harsh training continued, constantly changing its methods. There were no dropouts, but there were occasional injuries.

What was surprising was that Kishiar, the commander, also participated in the same training. The members were amazed, but Yuder wasn't. It had been the same in the past.

'For the highest-ranking person to move directly to determine the training method, it's not an ordinary thing to do.'

Unlike the members who were bonding with each other, Kishiar disappeared immediately after training, but just the fact that he was training with them was encouraging for everyone.

After spending three months like this, Kishiar finally called the members of the Cavalry again.

They stood before the commander with a look that was both the same and different from before. The most significant change was the officially issued black uniforms.

When more than 300 of them gathered, all wearing uniforms that looked similar to Kishiar's white uniform but much simpler, the atmosphere became unusually tense.

“First of all, I would like to thank you for following the unstructured training you have received so far.”

Kishiar began with a brief greeting, then got to the main point.

“For the past three months, I’ve been testing your limits. The reason was to establish and complete the structure of the Cavalry, and now it’s over. So, based on the training experience you have received, you must make a choice.”

“A choice?”

Hinn, the older of the blue-haired twins, asked. If the knights had been there, they would have glared at her for daring to question the duke, but there were only Kishiar and the Cavalry members there. Kishiar nodded with a smile, showing no sign of offense.

“That’s right. You will choose the divisions within the Cavalry. There are three choices in total. One is the Shin Division, the second is the Sul Division, and the third is the Jung Division.”

The explanation Yuder had heard long ago was repeated.

Kishiar divided the huge group called the Cavalry into three smaller groups. The Shin Division gathered those who focused on physical abilities, the Sul Division gathered those with magic-like abilities like Yuder, and the Jung Division gathered everyone else.

“I’m not asking you to choose right here, right now. Make up your mind and let me know within a week.”

Kishiar used the entire top floor of the new Cavalry dormitory building all by himself. Once everyone answered, the announcement was over.

“Yuder, which division will you choose? Obviously the Sul Division?”

On the way back to the dormitory, Gakane spoke to Yuder.

“What about you?”

Unable to confirm his decision right away, Yuder instead changed the direction of the conversation. Fortunately, Gakane didn’t suspect Yuder’s intention and immediately changed direction.

“I’ll go with the Shin Division. I thought about the Sul Division, but during the training, I felt that this ability might not be the end for me. If I can improve more… I think the Shin Division would be the right choice.”

Yuder looked at Gakane, slightly surprised. It had been only three months since he joined the Cavalry, and he had a feeling that his abilities could develop further? It was a remarkably rapid progression.

It was even more so in a situation where the academic world had not yet announced that the abilities of awakened individuals could develop depending on their efforts and conditions.

Though he died early and didn’t know it, Gakane’s talent might have been even more exceptional than Yuder had thought.

‘Where should I go, then?’

Yuder fell into deep thought. During the three months of quietly undergoing training, he became convinced that this situation wasn’t a dream and that he could truly change the future if he did well.

In the past, he had entered the Sul Division without hesitation and quickly became the deputy commander representing it. However, doing so wouldn’t make much difference from the past. He wanted to avoid repeating an already predetermined outcome.

‘Then, the only option left is the Shin Division.’

The Shin Division… Yuder repeated the name several times in his head.

Although his greatest ability was manipulating all natural attributes, he could also freely handle weapons, so there was a high probability he wouldn't fall behind in the Physical Division.

Of course, he might not rise to the rank of deputy commander as before, but that was actually what Yuder wanted.

'And if I go to the Shin Division… I'll see Kishiar La Orr more often.'

Yuder thought of Kishiar La Orr's abilities. His abilities, which nobody knew yet, were specifically suited for the Shin Division.

'He can freely control power and speed while demonstrating outstanding physical control, excelling in both physical and attribute-based defenses.'

The most special aspect among them was 'physical control.'

In the past, when he had been part of the Sul Division, he barely met Kishiar, the commander, as he was busy taking care of his subordinates. They did eventually meet regularly, but it wasn't what Yuder had desired.

However, things would be different if he joined the Shin Division. In the past, Kishiar had often personally supervised the members of the Shin Division and provided guidance on their training direction.

Kishiar was an incredibly skilled leader, even if Yuder didn't want to admit it. The fact became even more apparent when he went back in time.

He hadn't just formed th Cavalry based on short-term judgments. Yuder often found himself at a loss for words when he saw Kishiar's

actions overlapping with future events.

‘But why?’

Why did Kishiar La Orr pass the position of leader to Yuder at that time?

And without any hesitation, as if it had been planned from the beginning.

“…”

Yuder decided that he had to go to the Shin Division and find out the reason.

—

Most of the Cavalry members made their decisions about which division to join within three days.

Even those who initially had no idea eventually gained an objective evaluation of their abilities after three months of training and education.

Those who manifested strong physical abilities went to the Shin Division, and those who manifested abilities similar to magic went to the Sul Division. Those who didn’t fit into either category chose the Jung Division, but there were fewer than ten of them among the 330 total members.

“Yuder! Yuder! Wait a moment, please.”

Kanna, who had called Yuder now, was also one of those ten people.

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Chapter 9

“Yuder! Yuder! Wait a moment.”

Yuder halted at her call, just as he was about to escape the tedious reading and writing class.

In the world before Yuder died, Kanna was one of the few who had adapted better to the current Cavalry unit than anyone else, even though she hadn’t been part of it.

It was no ordinary feat to maintain a somewhat friendly relationship with everyone among the Cavalry unit members, who were diverse in terms of social status, age, gender, and even their places of origin.

Despite not having exceptional physical abilities in exchange for her special powers, the fact that she never complained during the grueling training was enough to win the affection of many.

As if her tense and rigid expression when they first met was a lie, Kanna as a member of the Cavalry unit was praised for being sociable and competent.

Kanna never forgot her gratitude towards Yuder, who had helped her pass the entrance exam for the Cavalry unit. Although they hardly had a chance to meet due to the different training schedules, they always exchanged warm greetings whenever they crossed paths.

Thanks to Kanna and Gakane spreading stories about Yuder’s advice on the Cavalry unit test as if it were a mysterious experience, Yuder received much more friendly attention from his colleagues than before.

It was a strange experience for him, who used to be alone among the Awakeners with the same power, as he was considered to be quiet and unlucky.

“Phew. It’s so difficult to catch a glimpse of your face.”

Kanna, who had called Yuder, panted with a smile.

“What’s the matter?”

“Oh, nothing much. I was just wondering if it’s true that you haven’t chosen your division yet.”

Yuder looked into Kanna’s blue eyes and nodded slightly.

“It’s true.”

“Is there any reason? The commander was curious about it.”

At those words, Yuder paused for a moment.

“The commander?”

Why was Kishiar La Orr’s name mentioned here? Yuder’s face, which tilted its head and asked back, had subtle emotions that Kanna could hardly perceive.

“I went to the commander’s office earlier with Jodie to report on our division selections. He asked if I had any idea which division you might choose.”

“…”

“I actually thought you would’ve chosen your course on the first day. Do you have any concerns? If you need advice, you can tell me anything. I’m confident in reading information, so if you need help, I’ll do it for free.”

Kanna occasionally used her ability to help her fellow unit members. Her ability to read the information of objects was surprisingly helpful to many people.

It was like fortune-telling, helping people find what they had forgotten or making them realize things they didn't know themselves.

It was only natural that many people wanted to see it for themselves, even if they had to pay for it. Everything was just as Yuder had expected.

"No, I'm fine."

However, Yuder had no reason to ask for her help. Not yet, anyway.

For him, the most important thing right now was not to lose the valuable human resources he had once forgotten and passed by.

'However… that man's intentions do bother me….'

Yuder hesitated for a moment before opening his mouth towards Kanna.

"Did he say anything else besides that?"

"Anything else?"

Kanna seemed to be recalling her memory for a moment, then shook her head.

"I don't remember anything in particular."

"I see."

"Maybe he thought I was the one who talked the most with you and just asked without any particular meaning. After all, you only have to decide by tomorrow, so don't feel pressured."

Although Kanna said that, Yuder didn’t think so. She didn’t know what kind of person Kishiar La Orr was.

Most of the members had a bottomless faith and affection for Kishiar, who underwent tough training with them and showed a fair attitude. However, that man was not as fair as they thought. Rather, if they knew…

Yuder furrowed his brow as he recalled several memories related to that man. Most memories of him weren’t very pleasant.

‘But the person I need to save and bring to my side first is still that man.’

Although he was the man Yuder had killed in the past, it was different this time. He was still alive and would not die in the future. Not only that, but Yuder also had to make sure that he remained alive and continued to hold the position of the commander of the Cavalry. Because Yuder would make it so.

Yuder composed himself. As he bowed his head lightly to Kanna to convey his gratitude, her face briefly showed a hint of wanting to say something more.

“Oh, speaking of which…”

“Yes?”

As he looked at her as if to ask if she had anything more to say, Kanna slightly furrowed her brow.

“The commander thinks that you and I are close, but isn’t it a bit too much that you still don’t speak comfortably with me? You speak comfortably with Gakane and your roommates, so why do you keep using formal language with me?”

Caught off guard by her unexpected words, Yuder momentarily froze. It was the first time someone had ever said that to him, from his previous life to the present. Why did he use casual language with some people and formal language with others? Well…

“Since you started using formal language first, I just use it too.”

“Oh, so it’s not a big deal then?”

Of course, it wasn’t a big deal. Yuder had always been terrible at building relationships with people, perhaps due to his years of living alone in the mountains.

The reason he was able to lead a group for nearly ten years was that the Cavalry was a unique organization that promoted people based solely on the strength or weakness of their abilities.

“Actually, I was really concerned about it. I was curious about the reason. But if it’s simply for that reason, I’ll use informal language from now with you. Is that okay? After all, the members usually use casual language regardless of their status.”

“Do as you please.”

As Yuder slowly replied, Kanna’s expression brightened.

“Great. I should have asked earlier. It feels refreshing. See you later, then!”

Yuder turned his head, watching Kanna’s retreating figure disappear.

He couldn’t have imagined that many Cavalry members who had found it difficult to talk to him properly due to their thoughts about him would, upon hearing Kanna’s words, begin using informal language with him from the next day.

At that time, there was only one thought that filled Yuder’s mind. As soon as the day’s tasks were over, he would go to where Kishiar La Orr was staying and deliver the news of the decision he had made. That was all.

—

The training of the Cavalry ended around sunset. After finishing dinner, Yuder managed to shake off Gakane, who was clinging to him, asking to play cards together, and headed to the upper floor of the dormitory building.

After climbing the seemingly endless spiral staircase for several floors, he finally reached the fifth floor. There, a white, antique door appeared, adorned with a golden lion’s head as a door knocker. It was the symbol of the imperial family - the lion that swallowed the light.

Yuder stopped for a moment as he saw the door knocker. He felt a strange emotion. Once, he could have entered his room through that door.

After Kishiar La Orr handed over the position of the leader of the Cavalry to Yuder, he used the original structure of the room without any changes.

The only difference was that, unlike Kishiar who had used an entire floor for personal purposes befitting his high status, Yuder had converted the remaining space, except for a small bedroom, into a place that could be used for public purposes.

People found it creepy that he could use the space of the former commander, rumored to have been killed by him, without any problem. But for Yuder, this was the only place where he could breathe without having to worry about others’ eyes.

It felt as if the room he had used for nearly ten years would appear as soon as he opened that door. It was a familiar yet very strange feeling.

Yuder suppressed his emotions and reached for the door knocker. However, before he could knock, the door opened from the inside, revealing a tall man.

“…Hmm?”

“…”

Apparently about to go somewhere, Kishiar, dressed in simple clothes with a long coat over them, momentarily widened his eyes before his expression returned to its usual state.

Perhaps it was because they had encountered an unexpected situation, but Yuder felt his heart beating a little faster, even though he thought he had mentally prepared himself for the visit.

Since his return, this was the first time he had properly faced Kishiar, and it was also the first time they had met alone.

During the Cavalry test, Kishiar had used a transformation spell on his face, allowing Yuder to maintain an objective emotional state. Apart from that, there had been no reason to worry about him, as they had barely glimpsed each other occasionally among the 300 Cavalry members.

But now, it was different. Would this be the feeling of facing a monster waiting for him in a dead-end alley with no other place or reason to turn his gaze?

Yuder looked up at Kishiar and took a thin, deep breath. Finally, his racing heart calmed down a bit.

Despite knowing that the other party wouldn’t have any thoughts about it, the constant intrusion of uncomfortable emotions and unnecessary feelings must have been due to the strong memories of the past.

Kishiar La Orr. In reality, Yuder had known him for less than two years. However, his existence had left an indelible and powerful mark on Yuder’s life, whether it had been a short or long time.

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Chapter 10

Kishiar La Orr had taught Yuder many things.

How to stand in the position of the Cavalry commander, how to endure in a court filled with hyenas, and even how to live as an Omega and an empowered person after awakening.

There had been times when he resented him for unilaterally passing on too much burden to him, but his thoughts changed slightly when it was about time for him to die.

Kishiar La Orr had definitely chosen Yuder as the commander among the more than 300 members with some kind of will in mind. However, it was unclear what he hoped for in making that choice.

Did he really not know that Yuder would become the lion to take his life when he handed over the position of the Cavalry commander? Could he, who was well aware of the imperial and noble families' circumstances, have not known that such an order would come down?

With Kishiar's abilities, he could have certainly escaped death by running away beforehand or, on the contrary, killed Yuder. But he didn't. Yuder discovered that fact too late to ask him why he had acted that way. The dead couldn't speak.

However, now he might be able to understand his intentions without receiving the burdens he offered. To do that, he first had to avoid killing him as before.

"I'm wondering when will the top Cavalry candidate finally arrive? It's about time you showed up. Did you finally make your decision?"

Kishiar spoke to him casually with a smile. His tone was far too relaxed for an imperial noble to address a commoner, but Yuder was not surprised. He already knew his personality.

“Yes. But if you were about to leave, I’ll come back another time.”

“No, it’s fine. I didn’t have any plans, I was just about to go out for a while and come back.”

Kishiar stepped back a few paces with a smile.

“Come in.”

Yuder had an unusual experience of stepping into the place as a guest, where he had once used it for a much longer time. The space, hastily constructed but considering it was for an imperial family member, showed the efforts of the artisans to match its dignity.

The high-domed ceiling was above the floor covered with the highest-grade carpet from the Southern Mountains without any gaps. The central furnace, fueled by magic stones from the North, looked more like a beautiful sculpture than a furnace.

The majestic bookshelf that filled an entire wall and the black marble desk beneath it exuded an awe-inspiring presence that one would hardly dare to touch.

What about the beauty of the dozen or so paintings depicting ancient myths handed down in the Orr Empire?

The white annular stone walls adorned with the paintings shone brilliantly in five colors even without light. Visitors who witnessed the spectacle were naturally drawn into a sense of awe, as if they were standing before a temple altar.

Of course, Yuder, who was all too familiar with the scenery, merely glanced around once without feeling any surprise.

Instead, his gaze was drawn to the upper part of the stone furnace that emitted red and blue flames.

A transparent gemstone, carved to appear as if it were floating in the air, served as a sword stand, and on it rested a single, massive sword.

‘The Divine Sword Orr.’

At first glance, it was clear that this was not a sword meant for ordinary people to use. Despite being stored within a scabbard that contained all manner of sacred power, magic, and the technique of different races, the energy it emitted was extraordinary.

The sword, which merely observing seemed to sharpen one’s senses with its keen aura, was none other than the Divine Sword Orr, said to have been bestowed upon the first emperor who founded the Orr Empire by the messenger of the God.

Those without imperial blood could hold the sword. However, being able to hold it did not mean they could wield it.

The Divine Sword was famous for being extremely particular about its user’s abilities and qualities. Throughout the thousand-year history of the empire, there had been fewer than ten people who were able to wield the sword.

And Kishiar La Orr was the only person of his time chosen by the Divine Sword Orr.

After his death, no one else had appeared who could wield the sword even until the day Yuder died.

The proud Divine Sword, which even Yuder, who boasted unparalleled abilities, couldn’t touch. Since no one but the chosen one could move the sword, it remained forever in the Pelleta Duchy’s estate, where Kishiar La Orr had last resided.

Due to its demanding nature, even the nobility rarely knew what the Divine Sword looked like. It was only natural, as Kishiar had not frequently carried or used the sword even after being revealed as the chosen one.

Why did the Divine Sword choose Kishiar if it wouldn't be properly used by its chosen master? If the sword knew that it would part so quickly with its owner, would it have made the same choice?

Occasionally, he wondered about this, but it was as unknowable as Kishiar's intentions.

"Is the sword fascinating?"

Kishiar spoke to Yuder, who was staring solely at the Divine Sword.

"Normally, people are first captivated by other parts of this room and don't pay much attention to it."

Indeed, it wasn't the reaction expected of an ordinary commoner.

Yuder murmured inwardly. Although the sword was a legendary Divine Sword, it appeared to be nothing more than an ordinary ceremonial sword for high-ranking individuals.

It didn't look like a sword that could be used in actual combat, and with the surroundings so grand and extravagant, it was reasonable that people didn't focus on the sword first.

'But for me, that sword always bothered me the most.'

Yuder recalled a memory from long ago. Now, knowing the appearance and abilities of the Divine Sword and the events tied to it in the future, it was natural for his gaze to be drawn to it. However, before he traveled back in time, when he was just a young member of the Cavalry, Yuder had first looked at that sword.

It was possible because his senses, which could feel mana, were so keen that they could penetrate the protective barrier of the scabbard that hid the sword's aura. Back then, Kishiar had shown great interest in Yuder for the first time.

Only then did Yuder finally turn his gaze away from the Divine Sword Orr and look towards Kishiar. With a soft, enigmatic smile playing at the corners of his lips, Kishiar watched Yuder intently.

So far, the gaze on Yuder, who was slightly above average, was one of mere curiosity.

"I just looked at the sword because it gave off an unusual vibe."

"Unusual? In what way?"

At this point, Kishiar hadn't yet publicly announced that he was the owner of the divine sword. That revelation would come later, when he was assigned a top-secret mission to collect the Red Stone.

So for now, it was crucial to feign ignorance while piquing Kishiar's interest.

"Just looking at it, I feel an energy as if it's targeting me. The sword sheath seems to be blocking it, but it can't completely hide it."

It wasn't a lie. In fact, at that moment, he was feeling the sharp energy flowing from the sword throughout his body.

'Somehow, the energy feels even stronger than what I felt before… Am I imagining things?'

In the past, he had felt unusual energy from the sword, but it was never enough to make his entire body feel sore.

Yuder used to possess extraordinary abilities, powerful enough to make people believe that he had no equal in the world. Could the

reversal of time have heightened his senses beyond their original level? It was an unknown matter.

Upon hearing Yuder's words, Kishiar's gaze shifted to the sword. A moment later, the energy that had been directed at Yuder disappeared as if it were a lie.

"Hmm. Can you feel the energy diminishing?"

Seeing Yuder's shoulders stiffen, Kishiar spoke with an amused expression.

"It seems you're not lying."

"I've never seen a sword with such power before."

"Really? Haven't you heard of something similar?"

For a moment, Yuder worried that Kishiar had noticed something. Even though he knew it was unlikely, he was briefly tense.

"Everyone knows the story of the founding Emperor and his Divine Sword Orr."

"…Ah."

His worry had been unnecessary. Yuder exhaled softly and nodded.

"So are you saying that sword is the divine sword?"

"Yes. To be exact, I'm the twelfth owner. It's a fussy thing, not allowing anyone but the chosen one to wield it."

Yuder already knew the story. Nevertheless, he feigned surprise as if hearing it for the first time. Kishiar did not doubt his reaction and continued talking.

“I’ve seen many awakened through the power of the Red Stone, but you’re the first to sense energy so keenly. Was it like this since your awakening? Or did you feel more sensitive to mana or other energies than others during your daily life?”

“It’s been like this since my awakening.”

“I see.”

Kishiar nodded, rubbing the area below his lips.

“I should have mentioned this earlier, but I was one of the examiners when you first took the Cavalry test as number 423. Did you know that?”

“You were the one on the far right.”

“Yes. You have a rare talent for distinguishing things so precisely. You truly are sensitive to energy.”

The main reason Yuder recognized Kishiar was not his sensitivity to energy, but because he had seen Kishiar in that form before. However, Yuder decided not to reveal the truth.

“Back then, I thought your talent was exceptionally suited to both the Shin and the Sul Divisions. But if I had to choose, I thought you would be more suited to the Sul… Was I wrong?”

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Chapter 11

“Was I wrong?”

In the past, he had said something similar yet different to Yuder, who had come to this place earlier than anyone else and simply declared his intention to join the Sul Division.

“Your talent leans heavily towards the Jung Division. It’s a good thing to recognize the direction of your own talents before anyone else.”

How strange it was to hear different words in the same place from the same person. Indeed, the future he had already known was changing due to his choice.

“Actually, I came here to tell you that I’ve decided to choose the Shin Division instead.”

At Yuder’s words, Kishiar tilted his head as if trying to gauge his sincerity.

“Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“What’s your reason for choosing the Shin Division?”

“I’ve thought that I want to move more towards the Shin Division rather than the Sul Division while undergoing training.”

“Hmm. Even if your talent would blossom much faster and greater if you were to go the way of the Sul Division?”

It seemed like a question that could read the future. However, Yuder didn’t panic this time and calmly answered as he had prepared in advance.

“Isn’t it possible that the opposite result could happen as well?”

“That’s true.”

A smile appeared in Kishiar’s red eyes.

“Usually, when people are challenged like this, they would hesitate and reconsider at least once, thinking they’ve come to a conclusion after careful thought. But it seems your opinion won’t change, so it doesn’t matter. Fine, I’ll process your application to the Shin Division.”

It was such a clean and straightforward response that it almost felt surreal. Yuder somehow felt a sense of emptiness.

He vividly remembered that Kishiar had made him the deputy commander responsible for the entire Sul Division for no apparent reason, almost simultaneously as he had entered the division. Because of that, he had thought that he would be suspicious and not accept him if he chose the Shin Division.

However, there was no such indication in Kishiar’s attitude at this moment.

“Normally, you would have to sign the documents yourself, but that’ll be after some other matters are settled.”

Kishiar didn’t say what those other matters were. However, Yuder knew what they were.

‘The time to receive a family name is approaching.’

He had received a family name not long after joining the Cavalry in the past. It was unprecedented for hundreds of new family names to be created and bestowed within a few months.

Most of them were created without sincerity, taking names from their birthplaces or from the scriptures, but there still existed an insurmountable gap in status between those who had a family name and those who didn't.

Looking back now, it was remarkable that the emperor had allowed such a thing. The opposition from the nobles must have been fierce; how had he handled it?

Yuder didn't have many memories of the previous emperor, who had passed away just before he became the commander of the Cavalry, and who was now the current emperor.

All he could remember was that the previous emperor had been the half-brother of Kishiar La Orr, the only blood brother; that for several years before his death, he had been so ill that he hadn't even shown his face properly in front of his subjects; and that the crown prince who had inherited the throne after his death had been adopted rather than a biological son.

Having lived in the mountains, he hadn't even known the face of the lord governing the village he lived in, let alone the emperor's.

The only time he had seen the emperor's face was during the one and only initiation ceremony in the Cavalry.

"Is there something more you want to say?"

While Yuder was thinking, Kishiar seemed to sense that he had more to say and asked him. Yuder stared at him for a moment and impulsively opened his mouth.

"Your Highness, why…"

“Call me Commander.”

He interrupted abruptly. His relaxed red eyes shone with mischief.

“According to Orr’s law, status does not take precedence over position. Of course, there are many who ignore this, but as long as I am here, the title of Commander is enough.”

“Ah, yes. Commander, may I ask why you created this place?”

“This place? Do you mean this building, or the Cavalry?”

He asked like that even though he knew exactly what Yuder was asking. Yuder had always disliked that sly aspect of him. Feeling an odd sense of déjà vu, Yuder opened his mouth.

“Of course, the latter.”

“You’re the first person to ask me that directly. Even the Emperor didn’t ask about the reason.”

There was no hint in his expression that he found Yuder’s question audacious or presumptuous.

“The reason I created the Cavalry? It’s simple. Power must flow in the right direction. If you try to forcefully block or eliminate it, you will inevitably pay the price for disrupting harmony. As someone with an ability like you all, I thought I needed to create a path for this power before it could harm the empire. And since I was the only Awakener among the imperial family member, I thought I was the most suitable. That’s all there is to it.”

It was a textbook answer that made it difficult to object.

Yuder hesitated for a moment before deciding to ask one more question.

“Then, will you be the only one leading the Cavalry in the future?”

“Why do you say that? Are you eyeing this position?”

“Of course not.”

If anyone else had heard, they would have rebuked him for his response, telling him to answer properly, please.

As Yuder frowned and answered, Kishiar laughed even louder than before. It was an incredibly joyful laugh.

“Well, for now, that’s the case. But once the divisions are established, I plan to select a deputy commander to assist me. With your abilities, you might be able to take that position.”

“I would be unqualified.”

Yuder answered immediately without a second thought.

“I’m not sociable, and I haven’t built close relationships with my fellow members.”

“Oh, I thought highly of you, but it seems you have a softer side than I expected.”

Kishiar shook his head.

“Sociability and friendship are undoubtedly good qualities, but if I were to choose someone solely based on those traits, I might as well have brought in non-Awakeners. You must remember that the power you possess was not something you were born with. You may be used to your previous life and feel inferior in front of higher-ranking imperial knights or nobles, but in a few years, the situation will likely reverse.”

“…”

“Even if you don’t understand the meaning of my words…”

“No, I understood.”

Yuder couldn’t immediately respond because Kishiar’s seemingly lighthearted answer was eerily accurate about the future.

He was right. Just as he said, the Cavalry members might feel inferior in front of high-ranking imperial knights or nobles now, but in a few years, the situation changed.

Only the Cavalry could resolve the ever-growing catastrophes, and they broke free from the previous system, experiencing drastic increases in social status, promotions, and power.

No longer could traditional powerhouses like the Imperial Knights or the Pearl Tower mages casually deal with the Cavalry and the Awakeners. The only ones who could suppress them were those with even greater powers.

Take, for instance, the commander, Yuder.

Yuder would challenge any insubordinate member to a one-on-one practice duel. He would beat them down in front of everyone, ensuring they wouldn’t dare to act rebellious again.

There were many complaints that it was like dealing with animals instead of humans, but it was the easiest solution, so it couldn’t be helped.

But at that moment, those events were still in the past. Yuder thought Kishiar would have a different approach to dealing with the members. But perhaps…

“If you have no more questions, you may leave.”

“Ah, yes.”

“This room is always open, so if you have more questions, feel free to come by anytime. If I’m not here, leave a message with my adjutant.”

Hearing Kishiar’s words, Yuder thought to himself.

Yuder had been in this room a few times before when Kishiar was the commander, but there was one difference today: the presence of an adjutant.

Kishiar’s famous adjutant, Nathan Zuckerman, who had been with him since he was a prince and not the Duke of Peletta, was absent. Had Nathan been there when Yuder had visited in the past?

As Yuder tried to recall his vague memories, Kishiar seemed to guess something and turned his head, saying, “Ah.”

“Come to think of it, you might not know who my adjutant is. He’s currently handling matters in Peletta Castle in my stead. Once he wraps up, he’ll be coming over. He’s not an Awakener, but he’s quite skilled with a sword.”

‘Quite’ skilled? Yuder nearly let out a sarcastic laugh but held it back.

Nathan Zuckerman was a Swordmaster. He hadn’t been officially recognized, but Yuder had heard it directly in the past and was sure of it. Yuder had even sparred with him. Kishiar’s casual comment about Nathan being ‘quite’ skilled with a sword made Yuder think of him as sly as a snake.

“Understood.”

After replying, Yuder left Kishiar’s quarters. Finally free from the subtle yet nerve-wracking aura of the divine sword he sensed behind him, he let out a long breath.

‘Sigh.’

One thing was certain.

Kishiar hadn’t created the Cavalry with the intention of handing them over to someone else from the beginning. In just two years since the Awakeners had appeared, he had an incredible understanding of their tendencies and the influence they would have on the future.

If someone as cunning as him had been in the Cavalry, Yuder wouldn’t have failed as miserably as he had in the past. Because Kishiar had a noble lineage and connections from birth.

Why would someone like him suddenly step down from his position as commander and return to his hometown? That was a question Yuder would have to investigate.

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Chapter 12

At last, all the members of the Cavalry had been assigned their divisions.

The commander, Kishiar La Orr, announced a one-month grace period, during which the members could actually live their lives and make any necessary adjustments. He also proclaimed that the treatment of the Cavalry members would be expanded to a level equivalent to the Imperial Knights. Furthermore, those without last names would soon be granted one, a declaration that surprised everyone.

The Cavalry members now belonged directly to the Imperial Palace, and they received a monthly salary equivalent to that of a third-class official. They were granted the right to reside anywhere within the Orr Empire and could use any state-operated facility without having to pay a fee.

If they were accused of committing a crime, the punishment would be decided upon and administered by the Cavalry commander and the Emperor, rather than the provincial lord. In essence, this granted them the same absolute immunity that the Imperial Knights possessed.

Consequently, their accommodations also changed. Those who had a house in the capital could now commute from their homes instead of staying in the barracks. Members who chose to remain in the barracks each received a room of their own. While there was a restriction that they could only live in the barracks for up to five years, excluding the commander, this was more than enough for those who did not yet have sufficient wealth to buy a house in the capital.

“It’s incredible. We’re really being treated just like the Imperial Knights. Of course, they each get a servant when they’re assigned a room, but we don’t need that much,” one member said.

“That’s right. We’re all capable of dressing ourselves,” another added.

Laughter erupted among the Cavalry members who had gathered for a meal after the shocking morning announcement.

Everyone’s face was bright, filled with hope. Among those beaming faces, Yuder silently dipped his bread into the stew and chewed.

“Yuder, did you hear? We’ll also get the same 30 days of vacation as the Imperial Knights. If our children are also awakeners, we can pass on this treatment to them too,” Gakane said with a smile.

“When we share this news with our hometown, everyone will be delighted. The days of being looked down upon for not having any land to inherit will finally be over,” Gakane continued.

“…Yes.”

“Oh, don’t you have to inform your family in your hometown as well?”

“I’m alone.”

At Yuder’s words, Gakane’s eyes widened, and he quickly looked apologetic, like a dog with drooping ears.

“I see. I’m sorry. I just assumed you had family back home because of what Kanna said when she read your bracelet.”

‘My bracelet? …Ah.’

Yuder recalled the day he went to register for the Cavalry examination. He had met Kanna for the first time that day, and in order to test her abilities, he had handed her the bracelet from his pocket to read.

The bracelet, made from small stones carved and strung together with thread, was the only keepsake he had from his grandfather. It was the single gift his grandfather had made for his young grandson, who would be left alone just before he passed away.

Although the bracelet was now too old and fragile to wear, fearing it might break, Yuder had kept it in his pocket as he had not yet fully settled into the capital.

After becoming the commander, Yuder had barely paid any attention to the bracelet, and when he returned to find it in his pocket, he felt a strange sense of unfamiliarity.

“It’s okay.”

Yuder briefly replied to Gakane and thought of the old cabin in his hometown’s mountains. He hadn’t properly tidied up the house before leaving in case he didn’t pass the Cavalry’s test, so he figured he should visit and take care of it if he got a vacation.

“Yuder! How about coming to my house during your vacation? I told my parents and siblings about you in a letter, and they’re all very curious. There are plenty of delicious foods and fun activities in the south. We’ll treat you well, so come and see.”

“What about us, Gakane?”

A few other members who were dining nearby asked in a half-joking tone.

“Are we not your friends?”

“Of course you are. But I want to take Yuder first, so you guys can come next time. Don’t you need to visit your homes first?”

‘He’s acting as if I’ve already taken a vacation.’

Although Gakane’s shameless attitude was slightly off-putting, Yuder didn’t say anything. The handsome man with the bright red hair like a rose never tried to leave Yuder’s side.

Yuder didn’t know what Gakane liked so much about him, but even after they were assigned individual quarters, Gakane visited him every day, urging him to hang out. Yuder had to chase him away several times.

Thanks to Gakane’s persistence, the attitudes of other members who had treated Yuder harshly began to change. Yuder was extremely surprised by the fact that he was accepted among the members to this extent solely due to the presence of Kanna and Gakane.

“Yuder, you’ll get a last name too. I’m envious that you’ll receive a last name from His Majesty the Emperor. I’d like to get one too.”

“Don’t say that anywhere else.”

As Yuder frowned and grumbled, Gakane hurriedly raised his hand.

“I don’t mean I envy commoners or anything like that. It’s just an amazing opportunity. There were only a few in the empire’s history who received titles and names bestowed by His Majesty the Emperor. I’m just envious of the chance to be recorded there.”

The last names and names bestowed by the Emperor were very special gifts given only to those who had made significant contributions. However, for Yuder, who had achieved the incredible record of receiving both, they didn’t hold much meaning.

“Even if I receive them… it won’t be that great.”

“You sometimes talk as if you know everything. Receiving a last name changes your status completely. Of course, it’s a good thing, as commoners are freed from the obligations of paying taxes and labor.”

He was right. But could there be anything that was unconditionally good in this world? Those who held titles were given new duties and responsibilities unique to them.

The Cavalry members, who would receive many things because of their power, would have to fight another war from now on.

‘Besides, the last name that will be given is hardly a last name at all.’

Ignoring Gakane, who seemed ready to recite a hundred good things that would come from receiving a last name, Yuder finished his meal and got up from his seat.

“I’m leaving first.”

“Yuder, let’s go together.”

Gakane put down his unfinished stew and got up.

“Wouldn’t it be better to finish your meal first?”

“We’re going to the swordsmanship training ground anyway. If I eat too much, I’ll just feel like throwing up.”

Gakane lowered his head and playfully pretended to vomit.

The Sul Division, a group mainly composed of individuals capable of using magic-like powers, spent most of their training to enhance their individual attributes and to develop more accurate and powerful abilities.

As a result, there was rarely a need for them to gather and train together, but the Shin and the Sul Divisions often had many members with similar abilities. Most of them belonged to the category of physical enhancement or excelled in using various weapons. They had to learn various techniques for using different weapons and how to protect others while coordinating their breathing.

Among all the weapon techniques, it was the sword that Kishiar La Orr demanded the Shin and the Sul Divisions to put the most effort into learning. Yuder thought he could guess the intention behind this.

Swordsmen had traditionally been treated as superior to those who wielded other weapons. While Swordmasters who made a name for themselves in history were relatively common, Bowmasters or Lancemasters were not.

Swordsmanship had traditionally been the martial art of nobles, and the most commonly available weapon was the sword. The ease of access to the sword resulted in a large number of people learning and admiring it, proportionally increasing the chances of Swordmasters emerging.

When people thought of Swordmasters, they would envision a high-ranking general or a knight commander responsible for their country's military power. The most notable feature of a Swordmaster was the ability to freely use aura, which they infused into their swords and emitted.

Many of the Cavalry members who entered the Shin and the Sul Divisions were capable of this feat without any effort. Although their swordsmanship and proficiency were lower than that of true Swordmasters, the intensity and output of the aura they could produce were not inferior.

Kishiar La Orr intended to raise the status of the Cavalry and gain strength through this ability.

“Still, I wonder what the Commander was thinking when he designated the new training ground as the Imperial Knights’ Training Ground No. 1. I heard that only high-ranking officials above deputy level use that place.”

As the Cavalry members entered the grounds used by the Imperial Knights, the atmosphere around them became tense. It meant that the people around them were not pleased with their arrival.

For the past few months, the Cavalry members had trained at the rookie training ground set up in a corner of the premises. Even then, the passing Imperial Knights had openly displayed their discomfort.

Now, they had been notified that they would be using Training Ground No. 1, which was like the knights’ pride. It was a wonder how Kishiar had managed to push for this.

‘Maybe he used an imperial order signed by the Emperor himself.’

Yuder deliberately did not exert himself fully during the basic training of the past few months. Even without giving it his all, his abilities were beyond the level of ordinary members.

Instead, he frequently practiced becoming familiar with the flow of energy around his body based on his past memories and drawing it into his body momentarily.

Traditional mages and knights, who used conventional mana, would accumulate the energy flowing in nature within their bodies for a long time and could only use the amount they had stored. However, those who awakened to the new mana were different.

Through the power of the Red Stone, they were able to freely use the unfamiliar energy that filled the world without necessarily storing it in their bodies, simply through skill and practice.

This meant that it was more important who could draw and use a greater amount of energy stably in an instant and how familiar one was with using and applying their own abilities.

However, adaptation and practice were necessary for this as well. Therefore, it was helpful to spend a few hours every day meditating to become accustomed to the energy. It would be about three years from now before this fact was revealed, but it wouldn't hurt to start early.

Gakane seemed to mistake Yuder, who meditated every morning, for a devout follower of the Sun God, but Yuder found it too bothersome to correct him and simply let him remain under that impression.

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Chapter 13

The Imperial Knights' Training Grounds No. 1 stood proudly in the very center of a vast area.

Right next to the training grounds was the Knights' core institution, the Hall of Orr's Glory, built to overlook the site. Most of the administrative tasks, mission assignments, important events, and various tasks performed by the knights of deputy level or higher took place there.

In other words, it was the heart of the military force that protected the capital and moved the entire empire.

It was an utter disgrace for the Imperial Knights that these individuals, who had been mere insects just a few months ago, were now setting foot in such a place.

"Look over there. A few more of them are coming."

A sharp voice rang out towards Gakane and Yuder as they entered the training grounds. A group of knights, not bothering to hide their anger, sneered at the Cavalry members.

"Look at those arms without a single muscle showing. And what about those hands without a hint of calluses? What on earth can we accomplish with them? Can they even read?"

"I can't believe such a disgraceful event is happening in the thousand-year history of the Imperial Knights. I wonder what His Majesty and the Commander are thinking."

"…"

Yuder glanced at them once and then ignored them. Gakane's face turned slightly red, but he didn't show any other reaction.

"Welcome, Gakane."

They met the newcomers and the other members already in the training grounds. Their expressions were not good either, having heard the knights' mockery earlier.

A woman with tightly bound long hair stepped forward and greeted Gakane first.

"Ever. You got here early."

'Once she receives her last name, she will become Ever Beck.'

Yuder had known her for some time. She was one of the first awakened individuals who gained fame in the empire after the Red Stone fell two years ago. Previously an ordinary country girl, her story garnered much attention.

A slender woman who single-handedly killed a horde of monsters that had come down from the mountains in search of food. There was no more shocking news in the world.

Her story spread like wildfire, fueled by eyewitness accounts. Nearly all of the members who had passed the Cavalry test and learned her true identity knew her story.

Her ability was to strengthen her muscles and skin, which allowed her to tear apart even formidable monsters barehanded, without the use of a weapon. Until Yuder's death, she had carried out several important missions in the Cavalry.

One should not underestimate her simply because she appeared ordinary. Though there were other individuals with greater strength or

defensive power, hardly anyone could use their power as effectively as she could.

According to Yuder's memory, Ever had also been appointed as the Deputy Commander of the Shin Division.

"It's quite noisy for our first training session since the division. Well, there's nothing we can do about it."

"Have they been like that the whole time?"

"Yes. They've been at it non-stop. It was as if they had been doing it since dawn. Well, I suppose busy nobles wouldn't really do that."

As Ever spoke with a cool expression, a faint smile spread among the Shin Division members.

"I almost thought they wouldn't let us in at all."

The small boy standing next to Ever waved his hand with a brightened face and grumbled. He was one of the famous early Awakeners, just as famous as Ever. A commoner boy of only ten years old, Jimmy Ocker, who had split a rock with a single branch.

'Of course, before receiving his last name, he was just Jimmy.'

Two years had passed since the Red Stone fell, and now 12-year-old Jimmy had left his parents' side and confidently passed the Cavalry test.

It was said that his parents, although commoners, owned a decent store and could afford to support their son without hesitation.

Among the 330 Cavalry members, he was the youngest to pass, but everyone believed he had abilities similar to the legendary Swordmaster. His ability to imbue his weapon with energy and use it

like the aura of a Swordmaster was more than enough to make enemies tremble in fear.

“I don’t understand why I can’t, because usually the children who join the Imperial Knights as a squire start at 10 years old, while I am already 12.”

As Jimmy pointed out, most of the prestigious knights began their lives as squires of senior knights around the age of 10.

Since they usually became squires to knights with connections to their parents, they didn’t have to struggle and mostly learned from experience by observing their mentors and occasionally receiving private lessons in swordsmanship.

When they grew older, they officially joined the knight order and were commissioned. It was no exaggeration to say that it was a world exclusive to them, one that those of lower status couldn’t enter.

“Show your true strength during the training later. That’s all you need to do.”

As Gakane ruffled Jimmy’s hair and offered advice, the Shin Division members nodded. There were many commoners among the Shin Division members, more than in Sul.

They were intimidated by the Imperial Knights’ haughtiness but were trying their best to overcome it.

‘Yes, it’s still a difficult task for now.’

In a few years, this issue would be resolved, but not yet. To break free from the deeply rooted social class consciousness and gain confidence, time and experience were needed. And Kishiar La Orr was supposed to make that happen.

Yuder looked at their faces and nodded. It was then.

“I wondered what all the noise was about, turns out it’s the newbies.”

A young knight with a frown on his face appeared along with several junior knights. On the knight order uniform he wore, there were three additional lily patterns engraved above the golden eagle emblem on his chest, unlike the other knights.

“What does the lily mean?”

As Jimmy asked with a bewildered expression, Gakane spoke without taking his eyes off the knight.

“The golden eagle is the symbol of the Imperial Knights. And the lily is a symbol of nobility. If there are five lilies on the uniform, it means the knight commander, four means the deputy commander, and three means the rank just below.”

“So, he’s a very high-ranking person.”

“Yeah. Well, most people don’t even get a single lily before they retire.”

Gakane had once mentioned that he had aimed to join a famous knight order and learned swordsmanship during his childhood. However, he had to give up because his family, despite its prestigious name, didn’t have the power to afford the necessary funds to become a knight.

The reason there were no commoners in famous knight orders was that the shining uniforms, armor, swords, and horses were not all provided by the higher-ups.

The knights had spent a considerable amount of money to maintain their dignity, especially those of the Imperial Knights, where all members were nobles.

The blue uniforms they wore were made of the highest quality fabric, and their swords were as renowned as the family heirlooms of their respective houses.

The situation was entirely different from the Cavalry, where almost none of them owned a personal sword, except for the recently issued black uniforms.

“Who told you that you’re allowed in here?”

The knight with three lily badges approached the Cavalry members. As most of them couldn’t confidently stand up against such an arrogant nobleman, panic spread among them. Even the usually confident Gakane’s face showed a hint of worry for a moment.

“We have gathered here under the command of our Commander for training.”

“The Commander? Are you talking about the Duke of Peletta?”

“Yes.”

Even though he knew the answer, he asked anyway. His arrogant expression said it all.

“I have seen him many times since we were young. He was always a man of many indulgences, but I never thought he would stoop so low as to gather the likes of you and act as a Commander. It must be his greatest whim yet. His knights in Peletta must be weeping.”

“…”

As the knight mocked their relationship with Kishiar, anger spread across the faces of the Cavalry members. Someone clenched their fist, and the knights behind the one with the three lilies placed their

hands on their swords with scowling faces, appearing ready to draw their weapons at any moment.

Yet, only Yuder maintained a calm, expressionless face amidst the tense atmosphere.

“Excuse me, but who are you?”

Yuder genuinely didn’t know who the man was. It wasn’t just because Yuder had few interactions with the imperial knights in the past due to his commoner background.

He thought he had a good grasp of the faces of the nobles he had met since becoming captain, but there were only a few reasons he could think of for not recognizing the man in front of him.

One, the man had died or retired before Yuder became captain. Two, the man had returned to his own territory.

Neither reason was honorable for a young knight in his prime, especially if he was from a noble family with enough influence to live comfortably in the capital.

The man in front of him must have disappeared from the scene before two years had passed. Knowing that, there was nothing to worry about.

‘Even if he turns out to be alive in the future, it doesn’t matter.’

“Who am I?”

The knight with the three lilies laughed incredulously, glancing around as if Yuder’s question was absurd. His bright brown hair, almost golden, was neatly combed back, and his smooth face was handsome enough to be considered aristocratic anywhere. But in Yuder’s eyes, the man was nothing more than a young fool without discernment.

“Kiolle da Diarca. Have you ever heard of the Duke of Diarca, commoner?”

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Chapter 14

The Empire had a total of five ducal families. Most of these families were prestigious and had been around since the founding of the empire. The founders of these ducal families were mostly the children of the first emperor.

When Ivanar La Orr, the first emperor's eldest son, ascended to the throne, the remaining four siblings each received a duchy and became dukes.

Kishiar, who held the title of Duke of Peletta, was a very rare case. It was extremely uncommon for someone who inherited the title of duke within the Empire to bear the surname 'La Orr'.

There was only one reason this was possible: because Kishiar's father, the previous emperor, had personally granted him a new ducal title while he was still alive.

According to imperial law, a prince who received a ducal title would be stripped of their succession rights, and could never vie for the emperor's position again. This precedent had been followed since the first emperor, and it was a good system for preventing bloody power struggles among siblings.

However, such conferred ducal titles were often temporary, and the recipients did not receive proper territories. Most of these dukes had no power, and for various reasons, they remained unmarried until they died. They quietly bowed their heads and lived in the corners of their territories until they disappeared from history.

The nobles believed that there must have been a significant problem with Kishiar La Orr, even if they didn't know what it was. Rumors circulated that he was outwardly fine, but impotent and of low intelligence.

Kishiar did not deny these rumors and enjoyed playing along with them.

He was famous for his love affairs since his days as a prince, but there was not a single person who claimed to have had his child, so the rumor was treated almost as fact.

The emperor’s leniency towards his younger brother Kishiar was also believed to be because of this. It was thought that he was simply indulgent towards his only full-blooded sibling, who had not caused any significant accidents.

So, when Kishiar first revealed his abilities and founded the Cavalry unit, and became its leader, some people believed he was just a playful duke who had awakened his powers and wanted to play as a commander for a while. It didn’t take long for this misconception to be shattered.

Even if it appeared to be the first meaningful Awakener group founded by a duke from the imperial family, it wasn’t as beautiful from the inside.

Nevertheless, the fact that Kishiar, bearing the surname ‘La Orr’, could take charge of a military group without causing any significant disruption, despite the image of challenging the emperor’s authority, meant there was a hidden power structure that ordinary people could not see.

Yuder only learned of this fact after becoming the Commander. There might be even more circumstances he didn’t know about, but those could not be known with both Kishiar and the previous emperor dead.

Thus, Yuder became even more curious about the real reason Kishiar had founded this organization. He knew that Kishiar was neither as foolish nor as impotent as some people claimed.

Was the noble reason Kishiar La Orr had mentioned really true? Was that all there was to it?

"…You seem to be so surprised upon hearing my name that you can't even speak?"

Yuder, who had been deep in thought, snapped back to reality at the sound of Kiolle da Diarca's chuckling.

The Diarca Ducal House was related by blood to the Crown Prince, who was to become the next Emperor. So, it was understandable that the young knight from that family would be quite arrogant upon hearing Kishiar's name.

However, the question was why someone with such a background had disappeared without a trace in the past.

It was evident that he wasn't a successor to the Ducal House since he had joined the Order of Knights. Among the four Ducal Houses, there wasn't a single one that focused on martial arts, so they preferred to make their children chancellors or priests rather than sending them to be knights.

Yet, despite this, he had become a knight, which meant he must not have been significant in his family. It seemed that his position had more to do with his family's name rather than any real skill since his inner power didn't appear to be exceptional.

'He probably lived like that, accumulating resentment, and was assassinated.'

Yuder thought this eerie notion quite casually as he opened his mouth.

"The Diarca Ducal House. Of course, I've heard of it."

“I thought so. Now, step back accordingly. This is not a place for people like you.”

“That won’t be possible.”

“What?”

Kiolle’s cold face contorted.

“Are you daring to defy my orders?”

“Should I drag him out right now?”

One of Kiolle’s subordinates asked, unable to conceal his displeasure.

“Our Commander instructed us to come here for training. Do you think you could proceed with such a matter without consulting the Commander of the Imperial Knights?”

Yuder implied that if the commander of the Imperial Knights had already given permission, there was no reason for Kiolle to intervene.

Seemingly understanding the meaning, Kiolle’s eyes reddened with anger. Yuder thought he would order his subordinates to chase him away, but Kiolle proved to be more immature than Yuder had anticipated.

The young knight immediately drew his sword and aimed it at Yuder’s throat.

“Come out. If you’re one of those bastards who are overconfident in their power, I’ll make sure you know your place today.”

“Yuder!”

From behind, Gakane rushed forward, trying to block Yuder's path.

"I've heard that the Imperial Knights don't draw their swords for no reason. Escalating this situation won't be good for you either."

"You're all so careless with your words."

Kiolle's aimed sword didn't waver. Yuder grabbed Gakane's shoulder as he tried to step forward in defense.

"Gakane, it's fine. Step back."

"Yuder? Surely you're not…"

"The Cavalry members are not much different from the Imperial Knights in terms of legal status. If both parties agree, a duel is acceptable."

A duel between a commoner and a noble was not normally possible. However, the situation was unique. As Yuder quietly pointed this out, the Cavalry members, who were standing behind him, opened their mouths in unison. Gakane's expression was the same.

"There's no way it's alright, Yuder. Even so…"

"It's alright."

Yuder spoke with certainty. Upon hearing his resolute voice, the strength momentarily drained from Gakane's green eyes. Yuder tilted his head as he stepped aside.

"It's perfect since we're in the training grounds. I accept your duel request. However, I don't have a weapon, so you'll need to provide me with a sword."

"…Ha!"

Flames sparked in Kiolle’s eyes.

“I have truly never met such an insolent fellow in my life. Congratulations. You’ve made me curious about the name of a commoner. What is your name?”

Didn’t he just hear it? Yuder subtly pitied his intelligence and opened his mouth.

“It’s Yuder.”

“Good. You, give your sword to that man.”

“Eh? But my sword is a family treasure passed down from my father…….”

As Kiolle gestured and spoke to one of the servants standing behind him, the servant made a grimace and lowered his head. The sight was so amusing that laughter broke out momentarily among the Cavalry, forgetting the serious situation they were in.

“Pfft! What on earth is he, he’s not even a five-year-old kid. Even the kids in our village wouldn’t play like that.”

“Give me yours! No! Waaa!”

“Who is babbling nonsense now!”

At Kiolle’s thunderous shout, the Cavalry members fell silent again. However, once the mood had changed, it could not be reversed, even with his shouting.

Even the Imperial Knights, who had surrounded them with the intention of watching the Cavalry take a hit, couldn’t hide their smiles. They mostly saw Kiolle as someone who strutted around relying on the power of his family.

Kiolle, noticing this, turned redder. He turned around and slapped the servant's cheek.

"You who dared to tarnish the honor of your master, leave the group immediately. Go back and pack your things right away."

"Eh? No, no. I will give you my sword, Lord Kiolle!"

"I don't need it. Didn't you hear me tell you to leave? Or should I kill you right here?"

As Kiolle's sword pointed towards his throat, the servant fell to the ground, screaming.

"I made a mistake!"

Most of Kiolle's servants seemed to be in their mid-teens. They knew how to use a sword to some extent, but they were still young.

To wield a sword so recklessly against such a child. Yuder thought about such a personality and became more confident in his speculation that Kiolle had probably been assassinated by someone he had offended in the past.

'Annoying brat.'

Yuder raised his hand and swung it slightly. Then, as if caught by an invisible hand, the sword Kiolle was holding stopped and twisted towards Yuder.

"Ugh! Wha, what!"

"Lord Kiolle!"

Fortunately, Kiolle didn't lose his grip on the sword. However, he couldn't withstand the force of the sword moving on its own, and he fell forward.

“…”

Dust rose over the splendid training ground, where the eagle’s pattern had been engraved with white powder on the tightly packed soil.

Everyone was in shock. Kiolle himself, his subordinate knights, and the others surrounding them were all so shocked that they couldn’t say anything. The only one not surprised here was Yuder himself.

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Chapter 15

“What magic have you used?”

“It’s not magic. It’s my power.”

His handsome face was no longer attractive, covered in dirt. Yuder explained kindly to Kiolle, who was looking up at him without even considering fixing his disheveled hair.

“Everything pure that comes from nature follows me. This includes the sword of the knight, made by refining iron from nature with fire. It means it follows me, not you.”

He moved his hand once again and Kiolle’s sword seemed to rise into the air before settling back down. Kiolle’s eyes widened as if he’d seen a ghost enter his sword.

“…That’s impossible.”

“There are more impossible things I can do.”

Yuder flicked his finger again, and flames burst over the sword in Kiolle’s grip.

“Lord Kiolle!”

Kiolle couldn’t withstand the heat of the rising flame and dropped his sword. Beautiful flames flickered and danced over the fallen blade before quickly disappearing. However, since it hadn’t actually burned or charred, there was no trace left on the blade or handle.

Kiolle, who had disgracefully discarded his sword, which was as precious as a knight’s life, in front of everyone, and was covered in dust, was gasping for air in disbelief.

Yuder sighed softly, seeing him glaring at him with bloodshot eyes.

‘If he attacks to kill, it might be a bit of a headache. I only meant to break his arrogance a bit.’

“Why didn’t you go into Sul Division?”

One of the Cavalry members gathered behind him asked curiously. As Yuder turned his head to answer, someone else answered before him.

“There’s no need to limit the options if one can do both.”

“Commander!”

Kishiar had been standing behind the Cavalry members unnoticed. The knights, who hadn’t realized he’d come because of the unprecedented surprising situation, alternated between surprised looks at the entrance and Kishiar.

Not noticing the tall Duke, who stood a head taller than the others with his remarkable appearance, walking in was almost a disgrace to the Imperial Knights.

Sensing a presence was part of the training all knights honed from childhood.

“I see you’ve been having quite some fun while I was talking to Theo.”

Kishiar slowly walked forward in front of the Cavalry. His red eyes took in the fallen Kiolle da Diarca, his abandoned sword, and Yuder’s face.

Yuder felt a slight unease looking at the smile on Kishiar’s face as he looked at him.

“Yuder.”

“Yes.”

“Commander, Yuder only stepped in for us!”

When Kishiar called Yuder’s name, Ever shouted from behind him. The other members, who had been holding their breath, also began to raise their voices one by one in agreement with her.

“That’s right. They were the ones who disrespected us and told us to leave first.”

“They refused to listen even when we said we needed to train!”

“…I didn’t call Yuder to scold him. It’s not bad to see camaraderie forming already, but let’s avoid misunderstandings.”

When Kishiar spoke with a chuckle, Ever, who had stepped forward, blushed.

“I’m sorry.”

“Forgive generously. Now, Yuder. Why didn’t you wait for me before you acted? You’ve already sapped your opponent’s will, haven’t you? There’s nothing left for me to handle.”

Kishiar, with an exaggerated wink, asked Yuder in a teasing tone. His question was not meant to chastise or reprimand him; rather, he was implying the opposite.

Shock spread through the knights like a shiver. Even Kiolle stared at Kishiar as though he had been struck on the head.

“Just as my unit has said. Why do others need to intervene in the matter I have concluded with Theo? Theo understood all circumstances generously. If you have any complaints, relay them directly to your commander.”

Kishiar casually referred to the commander of the Imperial Knights, Theo, as if he were an acquaintance.

However, the knights could not believe that their respected commander had willingly conceded the crucial training ground.

“Why on earth would the commander allow such a thing? This place is reserved for knights. Why should our training time be reduced for those men? What kind of place is this…”

When one of the knights couldn’t hold back his outcry, a gleam of amusement lit up Kishiar’s eyes.

“Is that so? Then you can train here as well. There’s no shortage of land, feel free to use any area you want.”

Just then, his low voice, which continued, captured everyone’s attention incredulously.

Kishiar gazed directly at the knight who had yelled at him, a smile playing on his lips.

“However, there will be no compensation for any potential catastrophes that may occur during training. They occur during official training hours. Whether the sword burns, the earth turns over, or trees shatter… A courageous member of the Imperial Knights should be able to handle it all. Right?”

“…”

The knight’s face hardened with a mix of insult and terror.

“We’re about to start training soon. Those who are confident, stay here. If not, you may leave.”

After a moment of silence, the Imperial Knights retreated. Yuder saw Kiolle, who had been glaring at him, push off the support of a

comrade and stand on his own.

“I’ll remember you.”

But as soon as Kiolle picked up his sword and disappeared, Yuder quickly forgot about him.

‘What’s the point of remembering someone who will soon be gone?’

“Yuder, are you okay?”

As the knights vanished, the Cavalry members who had retreated to the back all rushed to Yuder at once. They were as upset about what had happened to Yuder as if it had happened to them, cursing the knights and feeling a stronger camaraderie than before.

“Yuder… You were amazing. I should have stepped in more, I’m sorry.”

Yuder patted the back of Gakane, who was holding his mouth shut like a beaten dog.

“It’s okay.”

“But still… I don’t deserve to be your friend. I’m really ashamed.”

“It’s okay, really.”

Even if Gakane had stepped in, it wouldn’t have made much of a difference. But the fact that he had stepped in at all was a miracle in itself. It was the first time someone had stepped forward for Yuder.

“I always thought you were a bit of a downer because you never talk, but I see you in a new light.”

When Gakane stepped back, another member who had been behind him gave a thumbs-up with a smile.

“I guess I’ll have to change today’s training content slightly. Learning to wield a sword is important, but understanding your own abilities is even more so. This is the only training ground in the area that’s shielded by protective magic, so you don’t have to hold back. The protective sigil etched here by the Archmage Est still breathes. Feel free to participate.”

Only then did Yuder understand why Kishiar had chosen this place for training.

They followed Kishiar’s instructions, revealing their true abilities to each other, and trained to regulate their powers by comparing their maximum and minimum outputs.

Yuder succeeded without much difficulty, but among the members, there were more who were awkward because the training was not as they had anticipated.

“Our power is unprecedented. In other words, the more you know about yourself, the more it becomes your asset. Keep that in mind.”

When conducting the training, Kishiar replaced his usual languid smile with a clear and firm tone.

As someone swung a massively transformed hand onto the ground, the whole area shook with a thunderous noise. Yet, the fact that protective magic was cast proved true as the impact didn’t reach the buildings outside the training ground.

“Yuder. Come to my quarters for a moment after all the training is over.”

Before the training ended, Kishiar came closer, under the pretext of checking Yuder’s progress, and left him instructions in a voice so soft that nobody else could hear. Yuder looked at him and slightly nodded his head.

—

‘I wonder why he called me. Is it about that novice knight matter?’

After all the training was over and he had bathed, Yuder climbed the stairs alone. As much as he thought about it, the only reason he could guess for Kishiar to secretly call him was that.

‘An unprecedented event… I can’t guess.’

Yuder’s reality had changed since he chose the Shin Division. Things that hadn’t happened before were increasing, and occasionally, the future information he had became useless. It was the same now.

He knocked twice on the lion-headed door knocker in front of the top floor where Kishiar would be staying. The door opened immediately, and the person inside poked his head out.

“Welcome. Are you the one who was supposed to visit tonight?”

“…”

It was a familiar face because he had seen it before. But it was the first time he met him now. Yuder nodded his head toward the handsome man with an icy expression.

“The Duke has gone out on a brief errand. He will be back soon, so please have a seat in the meantime.”

His body, accustomed to wielding a sword for a long time, was full of thin scars over strong muscles.

The man with the distinctive light red skin of the southern countries guided Yuder to a table with an emotionless expression and offered him a teacup that seemed to have been prepared in

advance. The beautiful porcelain teacup looked ironic in his large hand.

“Please have some.”

“…”

After finishing his tasks, he quietly retreated to the bookshelf and stood. It seemed like he was just standing, but it was a position where he could perceive everything in the room at a glance.

‘Is this what they call a Swordmaster.’

Yuder felt a subtle admiration for him.

He was none other than Nathan Zuckerman, the hidden Swordmaster who served as an adjutant following Kishiar La Orr. He had heard that he was not from the Empire, but somewhere in the southern countries, but he had forgotten.

He blindly followed only Kishiar, and after Kishiar’s death, he disappeared as if he had never existed and never reappeared.

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Chapter 16

Externally, Nathan Zuckerman was merely an adjutant who was somewhat adept at swordplay, not a Swordmaster. However, the truth was that he possessed skills tremendous enough to rival even the Awakeners, a fact that had greatly surprised many.

Unlike the superficially dazzling knights he'd met during the day, he could feel a profound aura emanating from Nathan Zuckerman, born of the mana he had consistently refined and accumulated over a long period of time. The quantity was comparable to the exceptional mages that Yuder had once faced.

For a mage, the amount of mana stored in the body was important, but for a swordsman, the quality of mana mattered more than its quantity. Infusing a sword with mana was much more difficult than casting spells, so only the most meticulously purified mana could barely provide the sword with adequate power.

The fact that he had amassed mana equivalent to a mage implied that Nathan Zuckerman was extraordinarily skilled.

'I didn't realize back then, meeting him much later… He was remarkable from the start.'

This realization was made possible by Yuder's heightened sensitivity to others' energies, a sense that had grown incomparably more developed than it had been in the past.

While the abilities he could use hadn't changed much from thirteen years ago, this perception seemed to have been etched into his soul, unfaded even by the passage of time.

Perhaps it was more akin to tricks he had learned from encountering numerous strong individuals over the years rather than

an innate power.

“…”

Yuder did not drink the tea Nathan had offered, instead surveying the room. The room’s appearance hadn’t changed much from before. The divine sword on the transparent sword stand atop the heater was still there.

‘It’s still emitting an uncomfortable energy.’

Yuder tried to ignore the divine sword that seemed to be reaching out to him with its energy.

“Oh, you arrived before me. My apologies.”

A few minutes later, Kishiar returned. Nathan, who had opened the door for him, silently took his coat from his shoulders and received his gloves to tidy up. A duke who had his adjutant take care of everything, not even having a single servant at his beck and call.

It was strange indeed, but Yuder, knowing from past experiences that Kishiar always behaved this way, said nothing.

“Ah, chamomile tea. It’s in season now. Nathan’s tea brewing skills are excellent. You can drink it without worry. Surely you don’t think he would poison it?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Hahaha. It’s a joke.”

As Kishiar sat down in front of Yuder, a fragrant scent wafted into his nostrils. He initially thought it was the scent of an expensive soap used for bathing, but then he detected the lingering scent of a strong perfume. Yuder stiffened his shoulders momentarily before relaxing them and turning his gaze towards Kishiar.

The ends of Kishiar’s golden hair were slightly damp.

“You appear to have taken a bath.”

“Huh? Ah. Yes, indeed. You’re observant.”

Kishiar brushed his hair back with a smile. However, Yuder did not smile back.

‘It’s the perfume that was popular among the noblewomen. There’s no mistake.’

What could be the reason for someone to have a persistent scent of perfume on their body, even after bathing? Who had Kishiar met and what had he been doing? Yuder had a rough idea.

‘He always was quite the playboy…’

Even though Kishiar’s reputation wasn’t exactly stellar, he had always been popular. His godlike physique and stunning looks had always been coveted by many. He was famous for never refusing the temptations that poured his way.

In memories of the past, it seemed as though he had lived quietly after becoming the commander, but that apparently wasn’t the case.

Well, it wasn’t for Yuder to know. He merely thought that abstaining from such dangerous games, perfect for being met with the wrong end of a blade, would help maintain Kishiar’s reputation.

“I’m curious why you’ve called me.”

“Ah, yes. I wanted to talk about what happened today,” Kishiar swallowed the tea he had been savoring in his mouth.

“Fortunately, this time it ended because I arrived just in time, but it could have been otherwise. Or I might not have taken sides. Why

did you act so recklessly? I thought you were far from being impulsive.”

“…”

“Kiolle da Diarca is stubbornly persistent, which could become annoying. He has a very high sense of nobility.”

Who was Kiolle da Diarca again? After a few seconds, Yuder finally remembered that it was the name of the knight he had clashed with earlier in the day.

He had decided to remember only what he had done with that fledgling knight and forget the rest, and it had indeed completely disappeared from his memory. It meant that his brain didn’t feel the need to remember it.

“I acted thinking that such a situation would not arise. It’s fine.”

“It wouldn’t arise?”

Kishiar asked back with an intrigued expression.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I am much stronger. Even if they gathered everyone from their side, there were many from my side who possessed enough power to overcome them. That’s enough to handle whatever happens.”

“So, you weren’t stalling for time waiting for me to arrive, you just believed that you were much stronger?”

“Yes.”

“Interesting.”

Kishiar burst out laughing.

“So, how do you plan to deal with Kiolle da Diarca’s grudge? He’s already pressuring his family to punish you.”

“Is it troublesome?”

Instead of answering, Yuder asked back.

“If it’s troublesome, you can dismiss me.”

“…”

Kishiar’s smile deepened. He leaned his face on the hand resting on the armrest of his chair. His red eyes shone through his golden hair.

“You just made it into the Cavalry unit, and you’re saying you have no regrets?”

“…”

As long as Yuder’s future didn’t flow the same as his past, he didn’t care. Being expelled from here didn’t mean there was no way forward.

In fact, if he left, it might increase the chances of Kishiar remaining as the cavalry commander. Considering that, it wasn’t a bad outcome.

“I thought I’d scare you a bit, but it’s been a while since I’ve met someone who doesn’t get scared. Have you always been this fearless?”

“…It seems so.”

As Yuder recalled, he had received a similar compliment from Kishiar before.

…Yuder, you’re too fearless, and that’s a problem. But that’s what I…

‘No.’

Yuder closed his eyes, letting a useless memory from the past wash away. No. That future would not come. There was no need to recall it since he would make sure it didn’t come to pass.

“Why did you suddenly become so serious? It’s as if I asked something I shouldn’t have.”

“No, it’s nothing. Even if they hold a grudge against me, it doesn’t matter. I’ll make sure to avoid any damage to the Cavalry.”

“Ha-ha, Nathan, did you hear what he said? He’ll sort it out by himself.”

Kishiar burst into laughter again.

“A commoner orphan claims he can beat a great duke family whose lineage spans a thousand years. That’s really entertaining.”

“…”

Nathan’s ice-blue gaze met Yuder’s face, then quickly averted.

“I’m curious why you think your power is so extraordinary. From what I’ve seen, you’re impressive but I’m not sure it’s enough to warrant such confidence. Do you think you can defeat me too?”

Against Kishiar La Orr? It was a dangerous conversation, one that could invoke a charge of treason if overheard. But Yuder focused solely on the meaning of the conversation.

Could Yuder, as he was now, defeat Kishiar if they fought?

The abilities of Kishiar that Yuder had seen in the past were mostly physical. Even just one of his skills seemed extraordinary, appearing to be paired with a high level of magical defense. It wouldn't be easy to fight him directly.

'Besides, he was not even at full power… He is the only opponent I have never seen at full strength.'

Nevertheless, Yuder was probably the only one who knew about Kishiar's abilities to this extent. It was possible because he had accompanied him during his time as deputy commander.

Kishiar was a leader who primarily analyzed situations and placed capable people at the right places during incidents, rarely stepping forward himself.

It was the exact opposite of Yuder, who would always step in before his subordinates whenever something happened.

'I've seen him use one or two abilities at once, but never all at once… I've only heard about him using the divine sword, never seen it.'

The fact that Kishiar was the owner of the divine sword became known during the mission to retrieve the Red Stone, but Yuder hadn't accompanied him then and didn't know the details. Those who had been there were ordered to keep their mouths shut about what had happened.

What Yuder heard later was that Kishiar had drawn the divine sword for the first time to urgently deal with an enemy's surprise attack, and the situation was resolved instantly.

As far as Yuder knew, that was the first and last time Kishiar had used the divine sword.

What if Kishiar were to use all his abilities at once, while also wielding the divine sword?

‘I don’t know how the power of the divine sword is manifested… but it probably makes it easier to use his existing abilities.’

Kishiar didn’t directly show his abilities even during training, preferring to participate in a teaching role. Imagining unknown abilities had its limits.

“I’m not sure. I don’t fully understand your abilities, Commander.”

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Chapter 17

Yuder decided to answer honestly rather than skirting around the subject.

“Saying you don’t know isn’t an answer. Haven’t you made bold judgments without fully understanding the abilities of Kiolle and the Imperial Knights? For instance, what about Nathan behind me right now?”

“Well…”

Yuder inadvertently turned his eyes towards Nathan, who was standing behind Kishiar. At the moment, he was unaware that Nathan was a Swordmaster.

However, since he was reputed to have a keen eye for assessing the abilities of others, he needed some time to consider how to respond appropriately.

“I get the feeling that your deputy, Nathan, is so powerful that he could probably defeat all the Imperial Knights we’ve seen today if they were brought here.”

“Ho, did you hear that, Nathan? He’s rating you quite highly.”

Kishiar grinned. Nathan’s gaze also landed on Yuder’s face.

“And what if you were to compare him with yourself?”

“If I were to compare him with me…”

Yuder paused, taking a small breath.

“…I’m not sure if I could win right now, but I believe that could change with time.”

‘I didn’t realize how hard it would be to give a modest answer to something so obvious.’

Nathan was undoubtedly one of the top Swordmasters in this world, but Yuder was once a Cavalry commander who had a reputation for being unparalleled.

Although he hadn’t fully developed his abilities at the moment, if he could achieve the same level of growth as before, he was confident he could defeat several Swordmasters.

In the past, it took him nearly ten years to reach that level, but since he was retracing a path he had already traveled, he believed he could grow much faster this time.

“Hahaha. You say my deputy is stronger than the so-called experts of the Imperial Knights, and now you’re confident that he will eventually become weaker than you. Truly an impressive level of confidence.”

Kishiar laughed heartily. Yuder slightly bowed his head, wondering if Kishiar had always been so cheerful.

“So, you’re saying you can’t assess my ability?”

“…Yes.”

That was all Yuder could say.

“Hm, I see.”

Fortunately, Kishiar didn’t press him further. Yuder felt as if Kishiar’s red eyes were targeting him, like he was an intriguing prey.

“What about the Cavalry as you see it? Can you not speak about that either?”

Just when Yuder thought he would be told to leave, Kishiar asked another question. Yuder was momentarily taken aback.

He could answer questions about individuals, but a response about the entire Cavalry might sound like a critique of Commander Kishiar’s actions.

He couldn’t understand why Kishiar was asking him, a mere member, something that should be asked of other important figures.

“Well… I think there might be someone else who could give a better answer.”

“Of course, I’m asking others as well. But I’m asking you because you seem to have a good eye. There’s no hidden agenda, so feel free to answer. Whether it’s something you felt during training, anything. Don’t worry about being expelled for expressing your concerns.”

“…”

Yuder sneakily cast a glance towards Kishiar’s deputy, Nathan Zuckerman, hoping he might put an end to this dangerous conversation. However, Nathan remained silent, staring ahead as if he heard nothing at all.

‘I don’t remember anything like this happening in the past. I don’t understand why he’s acting like this all of a sudden. I just need to answer vaguely and get out of here.’

“The Cavalry… is a good place. We all haven’t fully realized our power yet, but I believe that with time, as per your guidance, we will greatly improve and establish a system that will contribute to the safety of the empire.”

“Really? Is that what you think?”

“Yes.”

Yuder knew that future was bound to come. Even after Kishiar’s death, the cavalry would develop as he had said, taking its place and becoming an organization more powerful than any other group before.

In a few years, the only ones able to protect the empire, and the world, would not be the knights or the mages, but the Cavalry and the Awakeners. Therefore, he had no doubts when he responded that way.

“Interesting. Everyone else says the opposite.”

“Pardon?”

Surprised by his unexpected reply, Yuder blinked. Kishiar, who had finished his tea, slightly turned the teacup to the side. Nathan Zuckerman, who had been standing by, filled the teacup with more red liquid from the teapot.

“They all say that I will fail. They ask how can I do anything with illiterate people and no system in place. It’s something no other country has tried, there’s no precedent. I have to create rules and a system from scratch.”

A deep conviction passed through Kishiar’s eyes, as red as the tea.

“There are already plenty of powerful mages and knights in this country, so why am I insistently bringing dangerous individuals into the capital? All I have is my own strength and the support of the Emperor.”

After speaking up to that point, Kishiar suddenly smiled.

“And yet, the promising member I managed to recruit says he can leave without any regrets, but he is also the only one who assures me that the cavalry I created is good and will succeed. Isn’t it funny?”

“…”

His words were too honest. Yuder had never expected to hear such words from him, even considering his past memories.

For a moment, Yuder doubted whether the words he heard had really come from Kishiar’s mouth. However, the duke in front of him was still sipping his tea with a languid smile.

“I’ve found you quite interesting from the start.”

Yuder lowered his gaze to avoid his red eyes, but ended up staring at the cooled red liquid in his own tea cup. He couldn’t escape that red color, wherever he looked.

“If someone else had said that, I would’ve thought it was just a flashy answer. But your eyes, they see things that others cannot, so I somehow want to believe what you’re saying.”

Saying that, Kishiar stared intently at Yuder.

“So, I hope you won’t say things about leaving without regrets next time. That’s all I have to say.”

Yuder rose, offered his greetings, and left Kishiar’s quarters.

An odd sensation overcame him. Who would have thought he would have such a conversation with that Kishiar La Orr? His previous impression of him had been of an enigma, a being whose true nature was unfathomable till the end.

‘What are you thinking, Kishiar La Orr?’

Had he always been this ambitious? Or had he sensed something from me?

The man Yuder thought he knew, or believed he knew, seemed strangely different, making him wonder if he had remembered incorrectly.

‘He seemed more worldly…and annoying…giving off the impression that his thoughts were inscrutable.’

But one thing was clear: from Yuder’s perspective, this Kishiar was not a bad person.

‘If things go well like this, there won’t be any need to inherit the commander position as before.’

This was certainly a good thing. But the strange sensation he felt seeing Kishiar’s unfamiliar aspect did not fade, but deeply lodged in Yuder’s mind, lasting until he fell asleep.

—

“Nathan.”

“Yes.”

After Yuder left, Kishiar, staring at the chilled teacup on the opposite side, opened his mouth. Kishiar’s cup was empty, but the one on the other side remained untouched, just as it had been from the start.

“What do you think of that guy?”

It was an unusual question. Nathan pondered for a moment before answering.

“If I hadn’t heard of his background beforehand, I would never have guessed he was a commoner.”

He was unmistakably a commoner, an orphan, barely twenty, yet he did not falter in front of Nathan, let alone in front of the noble duke who was as esteemed as the heavens.

Was that all? He seemed to gauge his opponent with an impassive gaze, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

His gaze suggested someone accustomed to evaluating others, and at the same time, someone who had long taken for granted standing in a superior position.

When their eyes met earlier, for a fleeting moment, he reminded him of his fencing master from his childhood.

One might think he lacked manners befitting a commoner, but there was something different about him. The fact that he did not drink the tea and simply left was one thing.

Normally, one would not stand up so dismissively if someone they deemed superior offered them tea.

Even if he has awakened his abilities, it has been only two years. Nathan Zuckerman grew up crawling with a sword, rolling around in all sorts of harsh places.

He had never seen someone show such an attitude towards someone who had trained for much longer and possessed much more.

Normally, most people would shrink in fear and avoid eye contact when meeting him or the duke.

How could a young man of merely twenty exude such a feeling? That man was… In any case, he was not just daring, but odd.

“He might be a spy, so it would be best to investigate.”

“Actually, I’ve already done some investigation. There really wasn’t much.”

Kishiar chuckled.

“He actively participates in training and his performance is excellent. If he had gone to the Sul Division, I might have immediately offered him the position of deputy commander.”

“If I investigate again, I might find something.”

“Well…”

The expression of the master, who would usually instruct to proceed meticulously, seemed somewhat nuanced. A strange smile, like he was holding back a laugh, appeared and disappeared from his face.

“Perhaps we need more people like him here.”

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Chapter 18

“Perhaps this place needs more of such individuals.”

“It’s better to cut off those who enter with ill intentions early.”

“If they had ill intentions, they wouldn’t dare to step up against the Imperial Knights, risking their lives. Especially against the Diarca Duchy.”

“…”

At those words, Nathan fell silent. A hint of amusement flickered in Kishiar’s red eyes.

“It was an interesting spectacle indeed. Almost a shame I couldn’t share it with you.”

Knowing how much Kishiar detested the nobles, and the four major ducal houses, Nathan sighed at the sight of his master’s rare, genuine smile.

“You seem to have enjoyed it immensely.”

“Enjoyed it… Yes, I suppose so.”

It was fun and unusual indeed. His attention was drawn to him from the start. With such murmuring, Kishiar stood up from his seat.

“By the way, Nathan, were there any messages while I was out?”

“Yes, a message had arrived from the Sun Palace.”

Nathan retrieved a short letter from the leg of the courier bird that flew in just before their guest arrived and handed it to his master.

The Sun Palace, a place where only the Emperor of the Orr Empire could reside, had its insignia, the sun emblem, stamped clearly on the wax seal of the rolled-up letter.

Kishiar took the letter, broke the seal, and quickly read through it.

“Hmm. As soon as the induction ceremony is over, they want me to bring the Red Stone.”

“Isn’t the induction ceremony the day after tomorrow?”

“Yes, it’s a tight schedule.”

Kishiar threw the paper into the central furnace. The paper, thrown into the flames of the magic stone burning in a rainbow of colors, was burnt to ashes in an instant without leaving any trace.

“Retrieving it isn’t the problem. It’s just that the system here isn’t fully established yet. I’m a bit worried about what might happen if I leave for too long.”

“You shouldn’t push yourself too hard. The Peletta Knights are on standby, so if you tell me the number of people you need, I’ll get them ready.”

Kishiar turned his head towards Nathan. He frowned and smiled as if he had too many worries.

“You worry too much, Nathan. Lately, I’ve been thinking that even my late mother would have worried less about me.”

“Since your awakening, everyone has been more concerned about you. They fear you might overexert yourself.”

“I know my body best.”

Kishiar cut off his adjutant’s words quietly.

“So far, there hasn’t been any problem.”

“I apologize if I overstepped.”

“No, it’s alright. And about the knights… Yes, prepare about five.”

“Five is too few. Then I should go with you too……”

“You need to act on my behalf here. Who else will receive the message from the Sun Palace?”

“But…”

Transporting an unknown object called the Red Stone with only five subordinates was too risky, even if Kishiar himself was involved.

“I have to return quickly, so I can’t move heavily. And it’s not just five knights, I plan to select a few from here to participate in the mission.”

“From here… do you mean?”

Despite knowing that this group had been painstakingly established by his master, concern inevitably crept into Nathan’s voice. Kishiar responded with an expression as if he understood his worries.

“Didn’t you just see? Given a bit more time, there are those who believe he could win against you. After observing for a while, I’ve noticed that there are many with quite interesting abilities. They are people who have gained power through that stone, so they might be of some help. In many ways, it is also the best opportunity to make the name ‘Cavalry’ known to the world.”

The decision had already been made by the master. Once Kishiar made a decision, he was not one to change his mind.

Nathan looked at him for a moment before bowing his head.

“I understand. So, do you plan on taking him with us?”

“I am considering it.”

Kishiar smiled faintly as he spoke about Yuder.

“I want to see just how much power he possesses that he’s so confident. His attitude of not caring whether he’s a noble or an imperial family is quite intriguing. Don’t you think it would be rather amusing to prod him a bit?”

“I hope your interest does not escalate excessively.”

Worry was etched on Nathan’s icy expression. Kishiar rarely took a deep interest in anything, but when he did, he pursued it relentlessly until he had resolved it.

Until now, this trait of his master hadn’t caused any major problems. However, he thought there might be trouble for the first time if this interest were to deepen towards the commoner they had just met.

Too little was still known about those who had awakened their power two years ago. As long as the extent of this man’s power remained uncertain, it was crucial to prevent any potential dangers to his master.

“Haha. Are you worried that I might get hurt?”

“…I am aware that such a situation is unlikely, but there is always a possibility.”

“Do not worry, Nathan. If there were things that could harm me so easily, there would be no reason for all this trouble.”

Kishiar patted Nathan’s shoulder lightly.

“Life is tedious, always needing to forcibly express what is stored within, no matter what. Compared to that, this is natural and interesting.”

“Well, now you should go rest too.” After Kishiar said this, Nathan bowed his head in acknowledgment, retreated from the living quarters, and entered another room prepared for him.

Even after his loyal adjutant disappeared, Kishiar remained standing still in front of the central fireplace, not retiring to his bed.

Unlike the red flames of wood-burning fire, the fire fueled by a magic stone emitted a mystic multi-colored glow, not giving off any smoke or ash, and burned for more than ten days with just a handful of stones.

Moreover, it didn’t require ventilation, making it possible to create such a beautiful fireplace.

When it was first invented, those familiar with wood-burning fires and mages had treated it as magic. However, it had now become a common sight everywhere.

That’s why Kishiar had specifically instructed to install this fireplace in the center of his dwelling.

Would the outcome of his creation here be perceived as this fire? The answer remained unknown.

—

Two days later, a ceremony of conferring last names took place in the open space in front of the accommodations where the Cavalry members stayed, with more than half of the entire Cavalry members in attendance.

It was a special event that had been held only a few times in the empire's history of over a millennium. The faces of the Cavalry members who were to receive a last name directly from the emperor were filled with awe.

'Reality may be humble, but still.'

As one of them, Yuder stood in his black uniform. Ideally, the emperor himself should have attended an event such as a conferment ceremony, to bestow the names or last names in person.

However, the number of people to be conferred was too large, and the emperor had already been absent from political discussions for several years, citing health reasons.

Therefore, the ceremony took place not in the imperial palace, but in a small open space in front of the Cavalry building, and Kishiar La Orr, the commander of the Cavalry, stood on the stage with a decree bearing the emperor's seal, not unlike his usual posture when making announcements to the Cavalry members.

Yet, even that was enough to inspire awe in the Cavalry members. Receiving a title meant rising above being a commoner. They were liberated from many strenuous duties of commoners, received many benefits, and could pass on their last names to their families.

In other words, they could establish a lineage. Although they were not on par with the nobility who owned territories and titles, in other words, they could become nobility if they acquired those as well.

When a commoner became a knight, one of the few professions that they could aspire to rise in status, and received the title of 'Sir', they couldn't pass on that title to their family, so this was an incomparably greater benefit.

Receiving a last name meant exactly that.

“Moreover, it’s a last name given by His Majesty the Emperor himself. It’s unbelievable.”

As names were called one by one and individuals stepped forward, Kanna, who was next to Yuder, patted her cheeks with an awe-struck face.

“I’m not sure if we really deserve all this, we haven’t done anything yet.”

Of course, they deserved it. They would become accustomed to receiving more rewards every time they completed a significant mission later on.

In Yuder’s case, who had been a commander, he had received territories and titles directly from the emperor. He even received several mansions in the capital.

He had received so many precious treasures, servants, and all sorts of honorable titles that eventually, none of them seemed to have any meaning. Looking back now, it seemed like a laughable memory.

“Yuder. Aren’t you happy? Smile a bit more.”

“…I am happy too.”

Kanna lowered her voice and whispered, perhaps because Yuder’s expression seemed dull as he recalled the past. He replied, but she seemed unconvinced.

“Does that look like a happy person’s face? I don’t think so…..”

“Next, Kanna.”

“Yes!”

Fortunately, at that moment, Kanna's name was called. Yuder watched Kanna go up on the stage.

"I confer the honorable last name, 'Wand', to Cavalry member Kanna."

"T-thank you. I accept the last name."

Kanna Wand. Kanna, who had received a new title, turned around with tears welled up in her eyes and bowed. That was the only scene that didn't exist in the past.

"Next, Yuder."

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Chapter 19

“Next, Yuder.”

“Yuder!”

Finally, Yuder’s name was called. As Yuder stepped out of line, a conspicuous redhead in the crowd outside the open space, Gakane, waved at him with a beaming smile.

Those Cavalry members who already held a last name didn’t need to attend the ceremony, but most, like Gakane, watched from the outside of the field, sending their unabashed applause and cheers.

Imperial Knights, passing by with sneers at their private ceremony, were occasionally seen, but nobody paid them any mind.

Yuder glanced once at Gakane before continuing on to ascend the platform. On the platform stood Kishiar, wearing an imperial ceremonial cape over his usual white uniform.

Underneath his golden hair, akin to the sun, his shining red eyes were as beautiful as a Sun God depicted in a temple.

But the gaze he cast on Yuder sparkled with a distinctly human curiosity.

“You seem to be without nervousness, as I expected.”

“Should I be nervous?”

In response to Kishiar’s quiet voice, Yuder tilted his head slightly and replied, eliciting an even deeper smile from him.

“No, I would have been disappointed if you were.”

“That’s settled, then.”

After all, he was going through this for the second time. Had he trembled a bit the first time? He couldn’t quite remember.

Without looking at the paper Kishiar held, Yuder already knew what was written on it. Toward Yuder’s impassive face, Kishiar raised his voice and began to speak.

“I decree that the honorable last name ‘Aile’ will be bestowed upon Cavalry member Yuder.”

“Thank you. I accept the honor.”

The given last name, as expected, had not changed. It was ‘Aile’, derived from the place where he had lived. Nevertheless, the name Yuder Aile, a member, not Yudrain Aile, the commander, seemed not too bad. He decided to think of it that way.

Without looking back at Kishiar, Yuder descended the platform. Not far away, Gakane was shouting cheers of congratulations with a wide smile.

“Yuder! There’s going to be a celebration party. We should go too.”

After the ceremony ended, Gakane, who had run after Yuder heading towards the dormitory, shouted cheerfully, patting his shoulder.

“…Where?”

“We’ve decided to go to the pub outside the grounds of the Imperial Knights. Juan has already contacted them to make sure it’s

entirely vacant. It’s a three-story building, so we won’t run short of space. Everyone’s already gone.”

He asked just in case, but the answer was as expected. Yuder listened with one ear to Gakane’s excited chatter, recalling old memories.

‘I remember turning down the invitation before and training alone.’

Yuder, who had just joined the Cavalry, didn’t understand his peers who were anxious to form relationships. What mattered to him then was proving to himself how far he could develop his power.

Having nothing else of interest besides growing stronger, he rejected someone’s invitation then and spent all day training at the training grounds.

Even now, he doesn’t enjoy social gatherings or drinking parties. But since becoming the commander and having been dragged around by the emperor’s orders until he was sick of it, he understood there were occasions he had to attend, whether he liked it or not.

Compared to all sorts of foul meetings he had attended then, this was nothing.

‘Back then, and now, my goals were different.’

At present, Yuder’s goal was not to increase his own power, but rather to prevent as many talents as possible from leaving the Cavalry, preparing for future disasters.

‘I can always improve my abilities. But once I lose a person, it’s over. I’ve learned that.’

“So you should go too, Yuder. It’ll be fun.”

“Alright. Let’s go.”

Yuder quietly responded to the final words of Gakane, who had been chattering for a while. Upon hearing this, Gakane let out a sigh of relief and gave Yuder a tight hug.

“I’m glad you decided to go! I was a bit worried you might refuse.”

“…”

It had been a long time since Yuder had been embraced by someone. Startled by the unfamiliar feeling, Yuder blinked, causing Gakane to quickly release his previously firm grip.

“Ah, I’m sorry. Did that make you uncomfortable?”

“No. …It’s fine.”

“Good. Then let’s get going. Everyone will be waiting.”

With a grin, Gakane took Yuder’s arm and led him away.

For the first time since joining the Cavalry, Yuder left the Imperial Knights’ grounds. The familiar streets of the capital were as bustling as ever, filled with enough people to give one a headache.

Gakane navigated the crowd with surprising ease. Watching him move forward smoothly as if he had eyes on the side of his head, Yuder could not help but admire him.

“Here it is. The Black Whale! They say it’s also an inn, and it’s really big, isn’t it?”

Finally, their destination appeared. As they approached the neat wooden building Gakane pointed out, the sound of uproarious laughter became increasingly audible. It seemed many people had already arrived.

“I’m here! And Yuder too!”

As Gakane, still holding Yuder’s arm, pushed open the door with his chest, cheers erupted.

“Gakane finally brought Yuder!”

“Since the bet’s results are out, those who lost, throw your coins!”

“Eh, I bet that he wouldn’t come till the end.”

Someone grumbled and tossed a coin made of copper. Coins poured down from the second and even third floors, yet the hat-bearer managed to catch every single one.

This wasn’t simply a testament to his good reflexes; he had subtly used his ability to create wind. Laughter filled the tavern.

“Gakane. Yuder! Over here!”

Kanna, sitting not too far away, waved her hand. Yuder took a seat next to her, accompanied by Gakane. Familiar faces were seen all around.

There were Ever, whom he had met during a training session at the Imperial Knights’ training ground not long ago, and Kurga, who had a bear-like face and had once been his roommate, among a few others sitting around the round table. On the table, there were already quite a lot of dishes and several bottles of alcohol.

“I bet on Yuder showing up. I’m looking forward to the payout; it’s going to be quite salty.”

As Kanna beamed, a chorus of disappointed sighs and shouts of joy erupted around them.

“Don’t be like that. What will you all do if he says he’s not coming next time? You’ve made your bets so openly,” Gakane spoke.

“No. Yuder didn’t even care about those fool nobles of the Imperial Knights, so it didn’t seem like he would care about something like this, right? Isn’t that so?” Ever replied.

With a worried expression, Gakane pushed a cup of rice wine towards Yuder. In response to Gakane’s words, Yuder briefly answered, “Yes,” in a dismissive manner, his gaze fixed on Ever, who was nodding in agreement.

“I’m fine either way.”

“See, Gakane, you’re too cautious with Yuder. But thanks to that, we made some money, so I guess we should be thankful for today?”

“Kanna….”

Gakane sighed resignedly, lowering his head.

“Well then, it seems everyone is here except the young comrades who cannot come and the comrades with a situation. Let’s officially start the celebration! A toast for our comrades who have been granted a last name!”

“Cheers!”

The Cavalry members all lifted their glasses in unison.

“To the glory of His Majesty the Emperor and our noble commander, cheers!”

“Cheers!”

And with that, the raucous party officially began. As they roamed freely around the tables, eating and drinking to their hearts’ content, bright laughter and happiness echoed throughout.

A former wandering band member was somehow playing lively music with an old string instrument and flute that had been left in the

corner of the shop, further lifting the spirits.

One by one, the comrades who had been sitting at Yuder's table left for other tables or ventured out to dance. Yuder watched Gakane being dragged off by someone and dancing quite well, despite his obvious awkwardness, while he leaned against a wall, sipping his drink.

He wondered if they had partied like this even when he hadn't been around. Just watching brought a not-so-bad feeling, prompting him to chuckle bitterly at why he hadn't come before.

'It seems much better than those nauseating noble parties.'

Although hardly anyone directly approached Yuder, any comrades who made eye contact displayed their intent to toast from afar with a light smile.

There was not a hint of negative emotion toward Yuder in their eyes. It was thanks to the fact they knew the full story of the incident that had occurred at the Imperial Knight's training ground two days prior.

The Cavalry members were each somewhat confused, caught between the newfound, overwhelming power they'd gained and their original perception of the world. Everyone believed they could defeat anyone, but in front of the weaker noble knights, they often lost their nerve.

Among the Awakeners, there were those of high status, but those individuals either did not apply to the Cavalry or, even if they did join, they inevitably had a distance from the common-born members.

In the midst of this, the incident Yuder had caused was more than enough to provide each of them with a tremendous stimulus and a refreshing vicarious satisfaction.

A Cavalry member of common birth had stood up to a knight from a duke's house with nothing but his strength, and Commander Kishiar had demonstrated that regardless of background, he would protect any Cavalry member.

Regardless of one's origin, from now on, the association with the Cavalry would take precedence. It was a message that had been conveyed.

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Chapter 20

Up until then, Yuder had been nothing more than one of the Cavalry members, a gloomy and inscrutable figure, albeit a powerful one.

However, after that incident, he began to be recognized as someone reliable, someone who could step forward on their behalf in times of crisis.

In a group of 300 people, all too busy adapting to worry about ranks, a figure emerged whom they thought would be suitable to tacitly take the role of a leader.

With Commander Kishiar ardently siding with the non-noble Cavalry members, their training mindset had become significantly more comfortable, and their sense of camaraderie grew exponentially as they found some spare time.

Before, they had only been friendly with their roommates or colleagues they got along with well. But two days ago, they began to freely interact with one another, even if they didn’t know each other’s faces or names well, as long as they belonged to the Cavalry. That was proof.

Gender or previous social status no longer mattered. Underneath their identical black uniforms, they were all equals.

Yuder wasn’t aware that the Cavalry members had begun to think this way, but he did notice a change in the way they looked at him.

It was the first time he had seen a sense of equal camaraderie in the faces of the Cavalry members looking at him, not a competitive spirit towards a strong man, nor a helpless dread.

It was a peculiar feeling he hadn’t known until he returned.

“Whew. Every time I try to come back, they keep asking me to dance one more time. I’m sorry, Yuder.”

After dancing with various partners three times, Gakane finally returned, wiping the sweat off his forehead, and flopped down in front of Yuder, gulping down his drink.

“How is it? The party isn’t that bad, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I thought so.”

Gakane, who was grinning, started to chatter, using the stories he’d heard while dancing as the topic.

“I heard that all the expenses for tonight’s party are being covered by the Commander. He said that the members needed more time to bond. He’s really a remarkable person.”

Kishiar? Yuder didn’t know that.

‘If I think about it… Renting out an entire place would have cost a considerable amount of money.’

It might have been a significant amount for the members, but it probably didn’t even tickle Kishiar’s pocket. Yuder remembered that during his Commander days, he had been asked several times to prepare meals and drinks with his own money to boost the morale of the members. But he only provided the money and was absent from the event, simply because he didn’t want to attend.

Would the members back then have interpreted Yuder’s intentions positively, like Kishiar? He was slightly curious, although it was something he could never know now.

“Yuder! Do you know how to dance?”

Just then, Ever, slightly flushed, appeared and asked.

“He can’t dance! He can’t dance!”

Gakane desperately tried to block in front of Yuder, but it was futile against Ever’s fingers. With just a light push from her, Gakane was quickly sent flying out beyond the table.

“Ouch!”

“I wasn’t asking you, Gakane! I asked Yuder. You’re so noisy.”

“I know how to dance.”

As Gakane was being rescued amid the laughter of the other members in the distance, Yuder spoke.

“But I don’t feel like dancing right now. I prefer just sitting like this.”

“Really? That’s a pity. I really enjoy dancing.”

Ever flashed a smile.

“When I first arrived here, I thought I’d never again have the chance to dance and converse so freely with someone. But, I’m pleased to realize I was wrong. This is all thanks to you, Yuder.”

“…”

“If you hadn’t stepped forward back then, we wouldn’t have believed we could enjoy ourselves like this now.”

Yuder set down the glass he was holding.

“That’s not true.”

It was true that he had stepped forward in front of the knights, but his motives were not as pure as Ever made them out to be. Rather, his actions had been reckless enough to incur resentment from the knights of noble descent, as he had stirred up unnecessary conflict.

“I didn’t have some grand goal in mind when I stepped forward, and even if I hadn’t, someone else would have eventually. If my actions helped in some way, that’s good, but don’t credit it all to me.”

The reason Yuder had stepped forward was simple. He felt that at that moment, in that place, the only one who wouldn’t hesitate to take the lead was himself, having already experienced that era once and having grown accustomed to leading as a Cavalry commander for nearly a decade. It was no more and no less than that.

Now, he had no desire to strive for a higher position and was content to live as just one of the members. Still, his time leading them remained within him like an obligation, like a debt.

He hadn’t appreciated each of them individually before. He thought he could handle everything by himself and was always on guard, erecting walls.

But when it came time to die, he finally realized it. Perhaps those who could help Yuder were not the powerful Emperor, the nobles, or even himself, but other beings possessing the ‘same power’.

“No matter what happened, it would have ended up like that.”

Yes, even without Yuder, the Cavalry members would eventually realize that they were much stronger than the Imperial Knights or the Pearl Tower mages. They deserved just compensation and treatment for the work they did for the country.

Yuder’s actions were merely an effort to reduce the trials they would have to endure before that future came.

In order to correct a misaligned button, he had to straighten out this Cavalry first.

Those who had been the core of the Cavalry and could have been its future were lost too early on due to ignorance and petty discrimination.

Furthermore, Commander Kishiar, who could have been a much greater asset than Yuder, died as soon as he established the framework. Even just correcting that could have been a huge help in preventing future disasters.

"…You speak as if you're prophesying?"

Ever, who had been blinking, soon chuckled.

"It's not a prophecy. It's a fact."

"I hope so. I'm still not accustomed to receiving disdainful looks for daring to set foot in this noble place as a country bumpkin commoner. Someday, I hope I can stand up like Yuder and reprimand others for looking down on those weaker than themselves."

"That will happen."

Yuder assured her with confidence. In the future, and the past, where he had lived, Ever was one of the initial members who worked hard in the Cavalry until the end.

Her stern demeanor, her unblinking eyes, and her propensity to pursue those who blindly trusted their lineage yet lacked ability, was famously known within the Cavalry.

Now, she was smiling and dancing with a much softer expression, but it didn't make her seem any weaker than her future self.

What she lacked was only experience. Given time to gain that, she could transform into her future self at any moment.

“Good. Let’s drink to that future.”

Yuder silently clinked glasses with Ever.

“Yuder. Have you fully manifested your secondary gender yet?”

“No, not yet.”

“They call me an alpha, but I still don’t really understand what makes me different.”

In a few more years, openly asking about someone’s secondary gender would become impolite, but it wasn’t the case yet.

The world barely knew about the existence of alphas and omegas. It was all still novel and liberating.

Would this atmosphere last forever? Yuder swallowed his thoughts with a nod.

“I see…”

“What exactly is the power of the Red Stone? It gives us immense power, changes our born gender, and even alters our entire being, yet we can’t see it. I don’t even know what it is. Is it really a power bestowed by the Sun God, as the priests say?”

“What are you talking about?”

Just then, Gakane, who had been pulled away by other comrades, finally returned and sat down next to them. Ever rolled her eyes and opened her mouth.

“We were discussing whether the power of the Red Stone is truly a divine power from the Sun God. Weren’t you curious? Or was it

just me?”

“Well, I am curious, but being in the Cavalry, won’t we eventually find out?”

Gakane answered, his eyes widening slightly.

“There are rumors that the Cavalry was formed to retrieve and protect the Red Stones, after all.”

“Is that so……”

Ever sighed. Gakane’s words were among the strong rumors that had been circulating since the first public notice for Cavalry recruitment was issued in the country. Yuder also remembered hearing such rumors from his distant past.

‘In retrospect, the rumor was half true and half false.’

The Red Stone that Kishiar had retrieved was refined in the Pearl Tower over the course of a year. It was then dubbed the ‘World Sphere’ and was to be enshrined in the deepest part of the sacred forest located north of the capital.

Although it was said to be enshrined, it was more akin to being sealed. One of the main duties of the Cavalry was to ensure that no unnecessary people could approach it.

Only two people could access that place without anyone’s permission. One was the Emperor, and the other was Yuder, the commander of the Cavalry.

Thinking about it made Yuder feel a tingling sensation, as if his undamaged mana hole was being pricked.

‘Come to think of it, isn’t it about time to retrieve that Red Stone?’

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Chapter 21

“Did everyone have a good rest after the celebrations yesterday?”

“Yes.”

The next day, Kishiar summoned all the members, who were visibly suffering from hangovers. Yuder was fine, but both Kanna and Gakane on either side of him looked terrible.

“Yuder, you seemed to have drunk quite a bit too, but you look fine. Why?”

“Could that be your ability?”

“…Maybe it can be considered as such.”

Yuder, who could manipulate all elements of nature at will, was immune to the effects of alcohol made from water and grains.

Only things that were artificially created, not naturally occurring in this world, could harm his body.

‘I could get drunk on alcohol made by mixing monster’s blood.’

However, that alcohol was originally made to poison someone. The fact that Yuder could not only survive but also get drunk on it was something only he could manage.

‘I remember being surprised to learn I could get drunk when someone apparently tried to kill me with it.’

“I’m really envious. I wish I had such an ability.”

As Kanna muttered, Kishiar, from afar, raised his voice and gently began to speak.

“I apologize to those who are still not feeling well from yesterday’s revelry, but our first task has been assigned to the Cavalry. Five of you gathered here will pack up and leave with me today.”

“A task? What could it be?”

“Five of us?”

At Kishiar’s words, whispers immediately spread among the members. Everyone, forgetting their hangovers, was excited. How could they not be?

This would be the first time since the formation of the Cavalry that they would officially reveal their presence. Regardless of the task, everyone wanted to be among the five chosen.

And today, Yuder was one of them.

‘Could it be that the Red Stone retrieval operation was announced today? This soon?’

He vaguely remembered that they had retrieved the Red Stone after receiving the last name before, but he didn’t remember it happening this quickly. Yuder hadn’t been interested in such things back then.

‘The ones selected before were two from Shin, two from Sul, and one from Jung.’

He painstakingly recalled the vague memories of the past. At that time, Kishiar had chosen those with somewhat unique abilities rather than those known for powerful ones.

Those chosen had all signed a contract stating they wouldn't discuss what happened during the operation until they died. There had been a minor accident during the operation, but they had successfully retrieved the Red Stone and returned.

'The accident that occurred back then made it known to the world that Kishiar was chosen by the Divine Sword.'

Yuder was secretly disappointed that he wasn't selected at the time, and afterward, he focused more on his training. When it was revealed that Kishiar was the owner of the Divine Sword, it was merely someone else's business to Yuder.

Later, he was constantly busy after being chosen again as the deputy commander of the Sul Division. Suddenly, he had to take over the leadership and saw Kishiar retire and return to the Duchy of Peletta.

He had been so caught up in the whirlwind of events that he had no time to pay attention to the World Sphere he thought was safely dormant in the sanctuary.

However, following many subsequent events and the realization of impending disasters, Yuder felt the need to investigate the affairs related to the World Sphere again, especially when he realized that he was the only one who knew about the heavy aura of destruction pressing upon the world.

The reason was simple. To protect the world, power was required, and Yuder believed that there was nothing in this world as powerful as the World Sphere, which was refined from the Red Stone.

The problem was that the original power of the World Sphere had been severely damaged and nearly sealed due to the rough refining process in the Pearl Tower.

The mages of the Pearl Tower had claimed they had merely carved impurities from the Red Stone, but the result was quite the opposite.

Even if he wanted to demand they restore it, the Pearl Tower had long since fallen. Yuder thought he needed to investigate the situation when the World Sphere was simply a Red Stone and restore its original power himself.

‘So, I had belatedly investigated the situation from the discovery of the Red Stone to its recovery…’

But so much time had passed that it was impossible to know exactly what had happened.

The only certainty was that all the Cavalry who had been chosen by Kishiar at the time had either retired and disappeared or died during their missions.

He needed power, but he could find neither the means to obtain it nor those who had had it. To make matters worse, Yuder, who began to dig into the past to find the source of that power, was exposed to many suspicions and vigilance.

Perhaps it had started then. The world Yuder had built began to crumble.

‘I’m not sure what criteria Kishiar used to pick the members back then, but if it’s the same this time, there’s a high chance it won’t be me.’

If he wasn’t chosen this time either, what should he do? Should he find Kishiar and give him some sort of warning? While he was thinking about this, Kishiar slowly began to call the names of those who would depart with him.

“Finn Eldore and Hinn Eldore from Sul Division.”

“Wow!”

Everyone was enthralled, but Yuder was in shock.

‘No, the names weren’t those back then. It was definitely…’

Was it Isis and Edin? He seemed to remember those two being selected. They were nothing like the noticeable Finn and Hinn siblings.

Yuder turned his gaze to Finn and Hinn, who were sharing their surprise not far away. The blue-haired siblings, with their elf-like faces, had chosen Sul instead of Shin Division, even though they had the ability to strengthen their bodies, which puzzled everyone.

In fact, the reason they chose Sul Division was simple. It was to develop another ability to move, which they could only use when together.

Despite this revelation, many people thought their talent should have bloomed in Shin Division.

Yuder had thought the same, often assigning them to missions that required physical abilities.

‘The mobility ability is useful but not necessary. They haven’t had their abilities awakened for very long, and the preconditions are tricky. Did he choose them knowing that? He didn’t choose them before, so why now?’

“Next, Kanna Wand of Jung Division.”

“Me? Really?”

Kanna looked around with a stunned expression. She was also someone who hadn’t been singled out before.

‘That’s three people now who weren’t selected in the past. If that’s the case…’

The people to be called next might be completely different from before. Yuder ignored the members causing a stir around Kanna, focusing solely on Kishiar on the stage.

His lips slowly opened.

“Next, from the Shin Division, Gakane Bolunwald, and Yuder Aile. The five of you, pack light and come to me as soon as this ends.”

Yuder Aile. His voice reverberated deep within Yuder’s ears.

“It can’t be…. We both got picked, Yuder. Is this real?”

Gakane’s voice sounded distant. Yuder glanced at him briefly, then blankly envisioned Kishiar’s face that had disappeared, feeling the reality that the future he knew was changing.

‘All five of us chosen are different from before, even me.’

It was fortunate that he no longer needed to seek a private meeting with Kishiar.

After Kishiar’s announcement and disappearance, the square where the members had gathered became a mix of those unable to hide their excitement and those disappearing with disappointment.

Yuder found himself caught among those rushing over to speak to him, Gakane, and Kanna.

“What’s the standard? Congratulations, really. Make sure you complete the mission and return!”

“You have to tell us what happened when you come back!”

They probably couldn’t reveal what had happened due to a confidentiality agreement. But Kanna and Gakane, who wouldn’t know that, talked nervously yet excitedly.

‘…What are you thinking, Kishiar La Orr.’

Yuder watched them, lost in thought. It wasn’t easy to guess at Kishiarr’s changed intentions.

—

It didn’t take long to pack. He didn’t have much to begin with, and the only clothes he had were the Cavalry uniform.

When Yuder arrived on the floor where Kishiarr’s quarters were located with just one small bag, he saw the rest of his companions who had arrived earlier. The luggage they carried was strikingly simple.

Kanna greeted him with a tense look, and just as Gakane was about to say something with a radiant smile, as if he had found light in the darkness, two small figures popped out from beside him and spoke first.

“Hello. You’re Yuder?”

“You’re the Yuder who stood alone in front of the Imperial Knights?”

Hinn Eldore and Finn Eldore. Yuder saw the siblings again for the first time since his return. Their manner of speaking was as straightforward as ever, almost to the point of rudeness.

In the past, they were among the few comrades who would talk to Yuder, whom no one else approached. Seeing their attitude unchanged from his memories brought a faint smile to his face.

“Yeah.”

As Yuder looked down at them and nodded, the sister, Hinn stepped forward and introduced herself.

“I’m Hinn. This one here is my brother Finn.”

“If it’s hard to distinguish because we look alike, just call us Eldore.”

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Chapter 22

“If it’s difficult to tell us apart because we look so alike, just call us Eldore.”

“I can tell you apart, it’s okay.”

“Really? How?”

“Even our parents occasionally struggle to tell us apart.”

How to tell them apart? It came down to the subtle difference in inherent energy between them.

The explanation seemed unlikely to be understood, so Yuder fell into brief contemplation. Thankfully, at that moment, the door adorned with a golden lion head opened, revealing the figure of Kishiar’s adjutant, Nathan Zuckerman.

“Has everyone arrived?”

“…”

“I am Nathan Zuckerman, the adjutant to the commander. I will brief you on the mission before the commander arrives. Please save your questions until after I have finished.”

Faced with Nathan Zuckerman’s exotic appearance and icy demeanor, everyone found it difficult to speak up, even the blunt Eldore siblings.

Nathan, seemingly accustomed to such gazes, continued unperturbed.

“This mission is a direct command from His Majesty the Emperor and is thus of utmost importance. It may seem like a simple task of retrieving the Red Stone and returning to the capital, but we are not fully aware of the power concealed within the stone. We must prepare meticulously in case of any unforeseen circumstances. There is a low possibility, but there may be interference from a third party eyeing the Red Stone. Therefore, five knights from the House of Pelleta, renowned for handling such missions, will accompany you and the commander. If you come across any issues beyond your capabilities, you are expected to cooperate with these knights.”

“Are you coming with us, adjutant?”

As Hinn raised his hand to ask, Nathan shook his head.

“No. I will be handling the commander’s tasks here.”

“How long will this mission take?”

“The commander anticipates it will take about a week.”

A week? Yuder’s face hardened at the surprisingly short schedule.

‘He must be excluding the time it will take to travel.’

Yuder remembered that it had taken almost a fortnight just to get to the capital to take the entrance test for the Cavalry, living near where the Red Stone fell.

Of course, he was young back then and did not know the way well, which could have slowed him down. But even so, he wondered if it was possible to complete the mission and return within a week.

‘How long did it take Kishiar to finish everything last time? It seemed to take longer than a week. Am I underestimating the Red Stone retrieval mission? Or is that the only time the Emperor gave?’

Yuder did not know how the current Emperor, who preceded the one he had served with, conducted his affairs. However, the Emperor Yuder had worked for always expected tasks to be completed within the specified time frame.

If the current Emperor shared this trait, it might explain why they were moving so quickly.

“Oh dear, it seems I am the last one here.”

At last, Kishiar made his appearance from within. He was dressed in a white commander’s uniform, covered with a black cape that was less conspicuous. A large hood was attached to the cloak, enough to cover his face if needed.

While the others seemed overwhelmed by his extraordinary aura and elegant beauty they were witnessing up close, Yuder’s attention was first drawn to the spectacular sword Kishiar was wielding.

‘He brought it, as expected.’

The divine sword, Orr.

Yet, except for Nathan and Yuder, no one could even imagine that it was the legendary divine sword. It was a given.

“We won’t be using a carriage for quick movement. Is there anyone here who can’t ride a horse?”

Horses were the most common means of land transportation. There were even jokes on this continent that there were more horses than cats or dogs.

In particular, the Orr Empire, mostly made up of plains, was famous for having well-maintained roads for carriages since ancient times.

Therefore, every citizen of the Orr Empire learned to ride a horse from a young age. Even Yuder, who had grown up with his grandfather in a mountain valley, learned how to ride a horse and guide a cart around the time he could walk.

It was necessary for him to be able to take the diligently chopped wood down to the village to sell.

“We can ride.”

After everyone nodded, Kishiar signaled to Nathan. Nathan, who had greeted everyone formally, went downstairs first.

“The horses we’ll be riding are not ordinary. You’ve probably heard of them at least once. We’ll be riding the Misty Wind Horses brought by the mages of the Pearl Tower.”

“Misty Wind Horse is….”

Kanna muttered with a puzzled face. Of course, Yuder knew what it was.

‘A hybrid created by magic.’

Long ago, the mages of the Pearl Tower conducted far more outrageous experiments than now. The creation of the Misty Wind Horse, a crossbreed of an ancient monster that only lived in the mist and storms with a horse, was the most useful result of those experiments.

‘I can’t believe we’ll be riding that. Considering the period, they must have been widely used. I forgot.’

Misty Wind Horses were living creatures, but unlike real horses, they never got tired no matter how much they ran and left no footprints. These creatures, which ran with a cold wind mixed with mist instead of a mane, were designed to obey only the commands

of the mages who controlled them through the magic stones embedded in their bodies.

Since they didn't get tired, they could move much faster than real horses, but their numbers were small, so mostly only the mages of the Pearl Tower used them.

Of course, only the mages of the Pearl Tower knew how to create a Misty Wind Horse.

'I'm glad we extracted the secret of their creation before it fell. Thanks to that, even after those dreadful hybrids disappeared, the technology could be used elsewhere…'

The old mages who had been locked in the tower for a long time stubbornly followed their own rules. Until the advent of the Cavalry, they were the only ones in the world who could perform miracles.

They were also the ones who most strongly resisted feeling the fate that the Cavalry would replace them, and they went beyond the limit to interfere and launch cunning attacks. Ultimately, their greed ignited their downfall.

The Misty Wind Horse, which naturally disappeared after the tower fell, Yuder recalled the tower that might collapse again in a few years and its symbolic monster, and followed Kishiar down to the lower floor.

"Your Grace, these are the Misty Wind Horse you requested we prepare."

Four mages, wearing robes with pearl buttons – a sign of their affiliation with the Pearl Tower – stood at the entrance, which was intentionally left clear. They held the reins of several Misty Wind Horses. The sight was truly magnificent.

"Wow…"

Most people would never see a Misty Wind Horse in their lifetime.

These creatures seemed as though they were made visible by sprinkling a handful of silver powder where a whirlwind had coalesced. They were enormous, appearing to be twice the size of an average horse.

In order to restrain these formless creatures, a bridle and a magical stone, both made of special materials, were necessary.

When the Misty Wind Horse, tethered to the red bridles held by the mages, let out a cool neigh and trod the shadowless ground, only the soft sound of the wind spread.

Yuder looked into the creatures' eyes, which resembled the holes of a sieve, and thought to himself how unpleasant their appearance was, even upon second glance.

"It's strangely fascinating. It shines silver. I wonder if it will sparkle like this at night?"

"Yes. But it's not enough to attract the attention of beasts or monsters."

Those creatures would rather avoid the Misty Wind Horse. It was only natural for a being that was not born naturally to be shunned everywhere.

Only humans sought to distort and exploit these creatures.

At Kanna's murmur, Yuder unconsciously replied, blinking when he felt eyes turning towards him moments later.

"How did you know that? Have you seen one before?"

"I've… heard about them. From a passing mage."

"I see."

Fortunately, his companions didn’t doubt the truth of his answer. After all, they had all left the places they had lived in for their entire lives only a few months ago, traveled for a long time, and came to the capital.

“Your Grace. It’s been a long time.”

After a bit more waiting, knights wearing light armor appeared not far away and kneeled in front of Kishiar.

Compared to the dazzling armor of the Imperial Knights, their attire was modest, almost mercenary-like. But the emblem embossed on their shoulder guards was the same flame pattern used by the Duke of Peletta.

These were the knights under the Duchy of Peletta, whom Kishiar had gathered.

“We had a hard time bringing eleven Misty Wind Horses. They tend to fight when grouped together, so when tied up, they must always be separated. Saddles aren’t necessary, but to control their speed, a specific sound signal is used.”

After confirming that all the personnel to retrieve the Red Stone had gathered, the highest-ranking mage from the Pearl Tower briefly explained how to handle the horses.

“When you need to slow down and stop, blow a long whistle once. When you need to speed up, keep blowing short whistles, and they will gradually speed up. The whistle doesn’t have to be loud. These creatures are made to understand the sound of the humans riding them. Also, be careful not to place them near a fire. They are weak to heat. They might melt or disappear.”

Those riding the Misty Wind Horse for the first time listened attentively to the instructions. Of course, Yuder already knew this, so

he paid more attention to observing the faces of the gathered people.

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Chapter 23

‘Five from the Peletta Knight Order, five from the Cavalry. And one Kishiar to lead them…’

The Peletta Knight Order seemed to have gathered their own elites, and discipline was maintained, but their strength did not seem outstanding. Of course, this was in comparison to the members of the Cavalry.

‘It seems they’ve chosen people based more on experience than raw power.’

Even if the Peletta Knight Order was somewhat weak, it didn’t matter. The strength of the remaining personnel was enough to ward off any ordinary threat.

‘With this group, there won’t be a need for Kishiar to draw his sword, even if something happens.’

In the past, a similar number of troops must have been deployed, and the combat power of the Cavalry members selected then would not have been low. Yet, why did Kishiar need to draw the divine sword?

What was the minor incident that occurred back then? Would the same problem arise this time?

It was still an unknown, but Yuder decided to prioritize the safety of Kishiar and the Red Stone above all else.

‘If either of those two were damaged, it could lead to significant issues in the future.’

He had another goal. To change the fate of the Red Stone, which was to be sent to the Pearl Tower after being retrieved.

This time, Yuder planned to prevent the Red Stone from reaching the Pearl Tower.

‘First focus on the retrieval, then confront Kishiar.’

While Yuder didn’t particularly like Kishiar, at least the man was someone he could communicate with. Before Yuder’s death, no one had understood or listened to his words, but he wanted to believe that Kishiar would be different.

Even if he didn’t disclose everything, if he could convince Kishiar that the ‘purification’ happening at the Pearl Tower was not the true purification, couldn’t he prevent the same future?

‘If even Kishiar can’t understand my words, perhaps it would be best to secretly investigate.’

If he couldn’t prevent the purification, he would at least need to understand the original form and properties of the stone. If necessary, he was prepared to steal it.

They mounted their horses under the guidance of the Pearl Tower’s mages. At first glance, the horses looked like mere clumps of wind, raising doubts about how they could be ridden, but touching the Misty Wind Horse revealed a tangible sensation, unseen yet felt by the hand. Judging that sensation correctly, they could sit atop the kneeling horse.

“Be careful not to let go of the reins. Even if you feel like you’re about to fall, you’ll be fine as long as you hold onto the reins.”

“This feels so strange.”

“Me too. It feels like I’m sitting on a squishy, invisible slime.”

Hinn and Finn, the siblings, scrunched up their faces as they pressed down on their seats. The body of the invisible horse sank and rose under their palms.

“What would happen if we used our abilities on this horse?”

“It’s quite disrespectful to consider using our powers on a horse said to be worth more than a cart full of gold.”

At that moment, Kishiar, riding the largest horse, spoke from behind them. His voice held a hint of amusement, but it was enough to startle the siblings.

“Commander!”

“Did you hear us?”

“We weren’t really going to do it.”

“Curiosity is a virtue. To answer your question, if a force beyond its limit is applied, the Misty Wind Horse will be destroyed and scattered.”

The words sounded like a joke, but they were delivered in a voice that felt strangely genuine. Eldore siblings, who had been looking at each other, hesitated for a moment before speaking up.

“Have you tried it?”

“Did you see it happen?”

“Of course. I think I was eleven at the time. My father the previous emperor had to pay for the horse because I had angered the tower master. As for me, I received the punishment of copying the scripture a hundred times.”

“…”

Everyone fell silent at the nonchalantly uttered title. Despite the casual attitude, they were reminded afresh that the person before them was of imperial blood, a descendant of the Sun God, who had been a prince until a few years ago.

And Yuder was slightly surprised for a different reason.

‘A story from his childhood……. Come to think of it, I’ve never asked or heard about it.’

Yuder was one of the people who had spent the most time with Kishiar before his death.

Whether willingly or unwillingly, he had to meet him, but he suddenly remembered that they had never shared a conversation like this before.

Even then, he thought it was a rather bleak relationship.

It was so bleak that even he himself did not expect Kishiar’s face to remain in his heart for such a long time.

“Who among those departing will lead the way?”

The mages of the Pearl Tower, having confirmed that everyone had mounted their horses, asked who would lead the way.

“These Misty Wind Horses have been trained to follow the path of the one holding a specific magic stone. Normally, we mages, who are accustomed to using the horses, don’t need this, but as many of you are riding for the first time, we prepared it. We’ll give this stone to the one leading the way.”

The magic stone they produced was a black stone the size of a finger. A knight from Peletta Duchy, holding up his hand, approached with his horse after they raised the stone, fashioned into a bracelet to prevent easy dropping.

“I accept. I will guide from the front throughout.”

“Good. Take this and remember not to remove it while you’re riding.”

The Peletta knight received the bracelet from the wizard, tried it on, and examined it a few times, assessing its comfort.

Nodding, seemingly satisfied, he caught the attention of Nathan, who had been watching everything from a distance. Nathan approached the horse Kishiar was on.

“Return safely, Duke.”

“When you say it with such a stern face, it feels like I won’t be able to return safely.”

“…”

Nathan’s face was expressionless. While there was no sign of laughter, Kishiar laughed with joy, his red eyes twinkling. Yuder watched as Kishiar, still holding the reins, leaned over to pat his adjutant’s shoulder.

“I know you will do well with the tasks given until I return.”

“…Yes.”

‘What does he know?’ Yuder’s mind was grazed by a fleeting question just as Kishiar straightened up and turned his head. His gaze swept over the ten people riding the Misty Wind Horses, pausing on Yuder’s face.

“Let’s depart, then.”

“Yes!”

Two Peletta knights took up the lead as guides, with Kishiar and the cavalry in the middle. The rear was once again secured by three Peletta knights.

‘In fact, if we go by the power they hold, it should be the knights who need protection…’

Yuder felt a peculiar irony as he pulled at the reins. He gave a short whistle, and the Misty Wind Horse he rode started to sway slowly before moving.

Since the west exit of the Imperial Knights’ camp led directly outside the city walls without any checks, the party headed in that direction, then set a proper course towards the south.

Golden sunlight cast long shadows over the plain as eleven Misty Wind Horses galloped freely. The journey to the Airic Mountains to retrieve the Red Stone had begun.

—

The Misty Wind Horses could run more than three times faster than a living horse, but they were less taxing on the body due to their unique feel, even after a long ride.

The Cavalry who were riding the Misty Wind Horses for the first time were all surprised by this fact, and during a break for dinner, they shared their thoughts.

“It’s really strange. I’ve been riding a horse, but why doesn’t my butt hurt?”

“My back doesn’t hurt either.”

As the Eldore siblings marveled while patting their backs, Gakane joined in their conversation.

“That’s because these horses are primarily used by mages. mages are known for their weak physical strength and discomfort with transportation. So, when creating the Misty Wind Horses, they were modified with the aim of compensating for these disadvantages as much as possible.”

“How did you find that out?”

“I asked the Pearl Tower mage who came to help when I first rode the horse. Actually, I’ve always wanted to ride this horse.”

Hearing that, Yuder recalled the mages who had only avoided him when he was riding the horse instead of helping him.

In that short time, Gakane had managed to have a detailed conversation with the mage from the Pearl Tower, known for their reclusive nature. If it was true, it wasn’t an ordinary conversation.

Perhaps Gakane’s talent lay in conversation, and Yuder thought it was a shame that such a person would disappear easily due to an accident in a few months.

‘I must save that guy, after all.’

“Excuse me, your meals are ready.”

Far away, the Peletta knights, who had skillfully cooked with a portable stove, waved at the Cavalry. Unlike the soldiers who brought little besides their clothes, the Peletta knights had two bags each, filled with supplies, hanging on either side of their horses.

It turned out all of it was necessary for living and eating.

The knights skillfully started a fire in the field and hung a pot on an improvised pot hanger made from broken branches to make soup, all without the help of the Cavalry.

As they continually took out seasonings, dried meat, and dehydrated bread from their bags, Yuder was repeatedly impressed by their survival skills.

“Um, the Duke said he would go to the nearby stream for a while, but he hasn’t returned yet. Could one of you fetch him?”

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Chapter 24

“Could one of you fetch the Duke?”

When the knight, who had taken the lead in guiding and cooking, said so, a slight sense of guilt grew in people’s hearts. As if expecting this, Yuder heaved a small sigh under their gazes and rose from his seat.

‘Yes, I suppose it would be burdensome for anyone to meet with a high-ranking individual alone. I understand.’

Even Yuder, who had been the deputy commander assisting Kishiar and later lived for years in a high-ranking position, was not eager for such a situation. How much more burdensome would it be for the others?

Nevertheless, he decided it was better for him, who had returned after living about ten more years, to act for these younger ones with promising futures.

“…Commander.”

As the knights said, Kishiar was standing next to the horse, which was tied to a tree near the creek, not far from the dining area.

Even though he was standing in a dark place, he looked strangely bright, as if surrounded by light.

‘I remember that was some sort of lineage effect… but I can’t remember.’

“It’s time for you to eat.”

“Ah, has it come to that already?”

Kishiar turned around.

“You came all the way here alone. It seems you are the most trusted among the ten.”

“That’s not quite the case.”

They all must have quickly noticed that there was no better person to put off troublesome tasks than someone who wouldn’t be scared no matter where he was placed.

People quickly recognized those who provided an opportunity to hide behind them.

Yuder walked ahead without looking back, a few steps in front of Kishiar. It was proper etiquette to either walk ahead of or behind a superior, so Yuder thought it would be better to walk where Kishiar couldn’t see him.

“When your name was called out earlier…”

However, if words came from behind, it was ultimately futile. Yuder stopped his silent walk.

“You looked incredibly surprised. Did you really not anticipate it? That I would call your name.”

“…My ability is not to read the future.”

He simply remembered what had happened in the future. But this time, everything that had happened then had changed. How could he not be surprised?

Even so, he hadn’t expected Kishiar to notice and bring it up when they were alone.

“Right, of course. But it was quite refreshing to see such an expression. It was interesting.”

“…Is that so? Should I say I’m glad to have entertained you, Commander?”

Yuder’s voice was icily calm. His tone was polite, but the meaning behind his words was the exact opposite. There was no one here who did not understand that.

“Hahaha.”

Kishiar laughed.

“So, are you discontented with following me? If you want to go back, you can go back right now.”

“I will fulfill my duty.”

Yuder answered as succinctly as possible. Whether he liked Kishiar or not, turning back from here was absolutely not an option. He had a goal to protect Kishiar, and the Red Stone, with his own hands.

“You’re really fearless. That’s why you’re interesting.”

“…”

Without responding, Yuder turned his body and began walking again.

“Yuder Aile.”

“…”

“I like you. Would you consider opening up to me and getting closer?”

Yuder halted for the second time. He turned around to face an inscrutable smile.

‘Why is he doing this?’

Had this happened before? No, they had never engaged in a mission together before, making any comparison impossible. Yuder, in a state of slight confusion, looked at him and opened his mouth.

“…I have been trying to respect you, Commander, with all my heart. If that was not enough…”

“I know. That’s not what I’m talking about.”

“I apologize, but my social skills are a bit lacking since I have lived alone in the mountains for so long. If I have misunderstood something…”

Inwardly, Yuder tried to understand Kishiar’s intentions while outwardly making excuses. Kishiar raised a corner of his mouth in a grin.

“So you’re saying no.”

“…”

“Alright, I understand.”

“Commander! Over here!”

Before Yuder could respond, a knight not far from them shouted in their direction. Yuder had to move towards the group, missing his opportunity to speak to Kishiar.

—

Two days later, Kishiar maintained his usual demeanor until they reached the location of the Airic mountain range where the Red Stone had fallen.

He didn’t engage in personal conversation, only opening his mouth to manage the interactions between the knights from Peletta and the Cavalry members.

Unlike the Imperial Knights, the knights from Peletta showed no hostility towards the Cavalry members. It was impossible to know what they were thinking internally, but outwardly their behavior was impeccable.

The Cavalry members assumed this was because their master Kishiar La Orr was an Awakener, but Yuder thought differently.

‘If it was just because of that, they wouldn’t behave so impeccably.’

The Peletta Knights were the first group Kishiar La Orr created after receiving his title. Consequently, they were also the first to be disbanded after his death.

‘They are very blindly loyal to their master.’

Even after only three days together, it was clear how they felt about Kishiar. To them, Duke Kishiar La Orr was not just a master but a true ‘Lord’ deserving of all respect.

How could such blindly loyal men have agreed to disband without any action when Kishiar died in the past?

‘Well, I can’t know what happened during those two years, even though they are showing loyalty now.’

Regardless, there would be no disbandment due to their master’s death this time.

“Over there! I see the flag of the stationed army.”

At that moment, one of the Peletta knights at the front shouted loudly. As he said, not far away, a flag was tied high on a tree, fluttering in the wind. It was a red background with a golden lion, the imperial flag used by the Orr Empire's army.

"We will be arriving soon, please slow down."

Whistles were heard here and there. Yuder too blew his whistle, signaling his Misty Wind Horse to slow down.

The Misty Wind Horse was indeed an extraordinary mode of transportation. Its speed was incomparable to that of a living horse and its tireless endurance was impressive. But its most astounding ability was its capacity to bound forth at great strides, without making a sound, and without causing much strain to its rider.

Despite having ridden almost nonstop for three days, minus time for meals and sleep, fatigue was barely visible on the faces of the travelers, a testament to the horse's exceptional ability.

Had they traveled on real horses or in carriages, they would not only have not arrived yet, but exhaustion would have been visibly etched on their faces.

The group followed the guide knight, slowly approaching the entrance to the temporary imperial army base set up at the foot of the mountain range. Before long, a barricade constructed from large logs and soldiers standing guard with spears in hand came into view.

"Identify yourselves. State your affiliation and purpose!"

"We come under the Emperor's command. In our company is the brother of His Imperial Majesty Duke Kishiar La Orr, the commander of the Cavalry and the master of the Peletta Knights."

At the knight's booming voice, the soldiers immediately straightened their stances.

“Please wait a moment. We have relayed the message and someone will soon come to greet you!”

Yuder felt his Misty Wind Horse snorting out a cold breath with a purr. Each time the horse’s mist-like mane, which disappeared like smoke, touched his skin, he felt a chill as if touched by ice.

As a life form not born naturally, his body instinctively rejected it. Because of this, he had avoided riding these horses unless absolutely necessary in the past.

‘I can tolerate it, but it certainly doesn’t feel good.’

Yuder hoped for the arrival of those who were supposed to greet them so he could dismount from the horse.

“Your Grace, welcome. We have been awaiting your arrival since we received the order.”

Finally, people appeared from within. Leading several armored soldiers was a middle-aged man with a sharp demeanor who immediately saluted upon seeing Kishiar.

‘…Isn’t that man the Southern Army’s General, Count Gino Bordelli?’

For a moment, Yuder doubted his eyes. It was a familiar face. Everyone knew that after the Red Stone fell, the army sent by the Emperor was guarding the area thoroughly, but he had never thought that a man of the general’s rank would be here in person. Even the Yuder of the past would not have known this fact.

Gino Bordelli was not wearing armor like the other soldiers. He only wore a military uniform with a gold lion brooch, bestowed by the Emperor, on his shoulder and a blue cape over it. But the aura he exuded was heavier and more intense than anyone else present.

At first glance, he appeared to be in his forties, but Yuder knew that in reality, he was at least twenty years older than he looked.

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Chapter 25

‘Gino Bordelli… He was in charge here at this time.’

The Imperial Army divided the vast empire into two major regions: the North and the South. The Southern Army and the Northern Army had traditionally been rivals, and while they varied in many ways such as discipline and atmosphere, they had one thing in common.

Whether in the North or the South, the Generals in command were invariably Swordmasters. This was a component that allowed the empire to demonstrate its powerful military strength among other nations, and those who occupied the position of general became a core force of the empire, becoming the closest servants and blades of the Emperor.

And General Gino Bordelli of the Southern Army was a man of unblemished integrity, known for performing his general duties for nearly 40 years with almost no controversy.

Born into a Count’s family and holding a sword even before he could walk, he did not join the Imperial Knights or any other renowned knight orders like other nobles. Instead, he traveled the world, dedicating himself to swordsmanship, and became a Swordmaster at the mere age of thirty.

Usually, after becoming a general, one would not stop there but pursue more power, but Gino Bordelli desired nothing more, focusing solely on protecting the empire as a general. He was the idol of all sword-wielders, and this did not change even after the emergence of those who awakened with the power of the Red Stone.

A general who obeyed only the Emperor’s commands and exerted himself solely in protecting the empire as steadfastly as a massive rock. However, he retired a few years after Yuder became a

Commander, and his subordinate succeeded him to the position of general.

‘I kept thinking he might have helped me back then.’

After recognizing the signs of a disaster, Yuder sought out several people to ask for advice and assistance. Gino Bordelli was also one of those he had intended to seek. However, after his retirement, he had disappeared somewhere, making it impossible to locate him.

‘We weren’t particularly close before. It would be nice if this could be an opportunity to establish some connection.’

Even if he were to retire in a few years, Gino Bordelli’s stature would not change. He was still the most respected Swordmaster on the continent. If he spoke, his words would be valued more than a hundred words from Yuder.

‘Had he been here for two years? Or did he also come here in preparation for the retrieval operation? Either way, he must have moved because of the Emperor’s command.’

The Emperor had sent his only brother and the commander of the Cavalry, Kishiar, here to retrieve the Red Stone, and in addition, he had sent General Gino. The implication was clear.

‘The Emperor must consider that stone very important.’

If true, it would be a significantly different direction from the speculations Yuder had made so far.

Because all that the current Emperor had done with the Red Stone was to entrust it to the Pearl Tower—which was questionable as to how much it knew about the stone—messed it up, and then just slapped a plausible name ‘World Sphere’ on it and shoved it into the sanctuary.

He had even heard that after storing it, he did not go to check on it even once until he died.

Hence, Yuder had speculated that the current Emperor was merely curious about the stone.

But if that wasn't the case…

"It's been a while, Gino. I'm glad to see you looking well."

Kishiar, who had been wearing a hood, removed it to reveal his face. The soldiers inhaled sharply at the sight of his distinctive golden hair and red eyes, hallmarks of the royal lineage. It was astonishing to confirm the arrival of a man they may only get to see once in their lifetime.

Yuder disembarked from the Misty Wind Horse, along with his entourage. Kishiar parted them and went ahead to exchange a light handshake with General Gino Bordelli.

"You must have had a hard time guarding this place."

"Not at all. I've merely been doing my duty."

"Any problems?"

"Nothing significant, aside from a few local villagers who tried to sneak in out of curiosity."

As the two conversed and naturally stepped into the entrance of the barrier, the soldiers smoothly widened the path so the rest of the party could enter.

Holding the reins of his Misty Wind Horse, Yuder followed behind, straining his ears to catch the conversation between Kishiar and General Gino.

"How many people do we have here in total?"

“Approximately 300.”

“More than I expected.”

“We needed a large number to monitor the whole mountain. It was more about having enough eyes than raw ability.”

“More eyes than ability, huh.”

Kishiar chuckled lightly. Although General Gino was a towering figure, much taller than an average man, Kishiar was noticeably even taller.

The sight of the two walking together was like a glimpse into another world. Just as the soldiers were fascinated by the sight of the duke and the general together, Yuder noticed that the members of the Peletta Knight and the Cavalry were also showing interest.

The existence of the Cavalry hadn’t been officially announced to the world yet, so only a handful of people knew about them. They wore uniforms but were not Knights, and they gave off a different energy from the mages of the Pearl Tower, which seemed strange given the mix of men and women.

But unless something unusual happened here, the soldiers would likely pass by them without knowing who they were.

“Come in.”

General Gino led them to a building in the center of the base. The small building, which originally seemed like a hunter’s lodge, had been renovated and expanded to look somewhat decent.

“I receive all reports and conduct commands from here. You must be tired from your journey, but we’ve been ordered to finish the work as quickly as possible. As soon as you’re ready, I’ll give you a situation report here. Is that okay?”

Upon hearing General Gino's words, Kishiar's gaze turned to the Peletta Knights and the Cavalry.

"Is there anyone among you who is tired?"

"We're fine."

"We're the same."

The Peletta Knights shouted in unison, and Gakane responded resolutely. Kishiar nodded and turned his eyes back to General Gino.

"Then let's start right away."

"Understood. Would you prefer to hear the report and the matters related to the Red Stone alone? Or…."

"I'll listen with the Cavalry. And Sir Brugg."

"Yes!"

The knight who had been leading the way so far stepped forward.

"Sir, you too."

"Understood."

Leaving four of the Peletta knights behind, the rest followed General Gino into a room located deeper within. Inside, an enormous map that nearly covered one wall was affixed, and several old chairs of mismatched design were scattered haphazardly.

"My apologies for not having suitable accommodations for someone of your stature. However, they should hold up fine, so please, take a seat," Gino said.

"Isn't the purpose of a chair merely to be sat upon?"

Kishiar, with no hint of displeasure, pulled a nearby chair and seated himself.

“Everyone, please sit down.”

At his words, the Eldore siblings were the first to quickly take their seats, followed by the others who awkwardly and cautiously lowered themselves into the chairs. Yuder was the last to sit, choosing the farthest chair from which he could observe everyone.

Once everyone was seated, General Gino approached the map, pointing to a black dot at its center.

“This is our current location. It’s in the Airic mountain range, known as the Spine, that runs through the central part of the Empire. More precisely, we are located in the northwest.”

The military map he showed was far more precise than the common ones used by the nobles. It depicted part of the Airic mountains, painted in green to denote the mountainous terrain, with contour lines indicating altitude. Even a first-time viewer could quickly grasp the local geography, as everything was meticulously marked.

Furthermore, simple pictograms indicated the distribution and numbers of soldiers stationed throughout the mountains. The members of the Cavalry who were seeing a military map for the first time widened their eyes in surprise.

“The Red Stone fell here, two years ago. It’s a valley a few hours’ climb from where we are.”

The general moved his finger slightly downward from the spot he’d previously indicated. A red dot was marked there.

“However, as you know, since the stone fell, the surrounding area has been scorched and it has become a place where no one can

approach carelessly.”

A place where no one could approach carelessly. Yuder inferred a double meaning from these words. Not only was the area guarded by the military, preventing anyone from approaching, but the power of the Red Stone made it difficult for even the guarding forces to approach.

Yuder recalled a brief memory related to the Red Stone. Before his time reversal, he had watched from a distance as Kishiar returned from a mission to retrieve the Red Stone, along with the other members.

He couldn’t remember the exact condition of the Cavalry members Kishiar had taken with him at the time, but he remembered that there had been no visibly injured, meaning they had managed to walk back on their own.

Kishiar, at that time, unusually looked extremely fatigued, holding the Red Stone. More precisely, he was holding a bundle wrapped in several thick layers of cloth, presumably containing the stone.

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Chapter 26

It was a fleeting memory, but Yuder felt an exceedingly strange sensation.

Despite being heavily wrapped in silk, he could clearly sense that something within held a colossal power. Just by sharing the same space with it, the entire atmosphere felt dense as if the air had turned into water. A chilly aura seeped throughout the room.

Yuder wasn't the only one who felt this. All the cavalry members present at the time agreed they had experienced an inexplicable strange energy.

The next day, Kishiar appeared, carrying a box carved from transparent magic stone. Inside, on a cushion of red silk, lay the Red Stone. It seemed as if he had packaged it this way to present it to the emperor.

Just before Kishiar climbed into his carriage, Yuder glimpsed the Red Stone within the box from the window of his quarters. The stone wasn't actually red, and it was smaller than he had expected.

Had he not known it was the Red Stone in advance, he wouldn't have been able to identify it from its appearance alone. It was a surprisingly ordinary looking stone, given the peculiar energy it possessed.

After that, the stone did not return to the Cavalry, but was taken directly to the Pearl Tower. Thus, it was the last time Yuder saw the intact Red Stone in his previous life.

"Did you try to approach it?"

Upon Kishiar's question, General Gino replied tersely, "Yes."

“Ordinary soldiers couldn’t dare to approach it. Only those skilled enough to start accumulating aura could get close enough to see it, and I was able to observe it directly in front of me.”

“And what was your impression?”

“It was a very strange object. It’s hard to accurately judge, but it may not be of this world. The Priests of the Sun God said it felt different from divine energy, and the mages of the Pearl Tower have found it difficult to approach, so no one has examined it directly yet.”

“I see.”

“Frankly, I’m worried about Your Highness touching it directly. It could be dangerous.”

Without changing his expression, General Gino voiced his concerns to Kishiar, who had arrived.

“Some of the soldiers who tried to force their way towards it even vomited blood. It’s a mysterious object holding an unknown energy. It possesses a power that could change the entire continent. Wouldn’t it be terrible if it harmed your noble body?”

“His Majesty believed I am the most suitable person to retrieve it without harm. Is the general worried about something His Majesty trusts?”

“I am…”

Just as General Gino, who seemed to be losing faith in the emperor, began to speak, Kishiar held out his hand to silence him.

“Trust your eyes, which have watched me since I was young. In this world, I’m the only one who can handle that stone without being affected.”

“…”

General Gino looked to be just entering middle age, but in reality, he was old enough to be a grandfather. Therefore, he would have indeed watched Kishiar since his youth.

Upon hearing Kishiar’s words, General Gino closed his eyes and let out a deep sigh.

“Would I dare to doubt His Majesty and obstruct you?”

“Haha. And yet, you always find a way to interject.”

“It’s the worry of an old servant who, despite knowing it’s useless, always lets his concern get the better of him.”

“Don’t fret. I’m not so frail as to be undone by a mere stone.”

With that, Kishiar rose from his seat. As all eyes focused on him, he glanced around the room, then broke into a smile and spoke.

“Now, before we set off, let’s all sign a confidentiality agreement.”

The Cavalry members looked stupefied, but Yuder thought to himself, ‘so it has come to this.’

Not only for this mission, but most of the tasks that the Cavalry would handle in the future required absolute secrecy. Thus, Yuder himself had signed such agreements countless times before embarking on missions.

“It’s a magic contract used by many knights and mages before undertaking important missions. You write down your pledge, and after the parties sign, the magic within the paper binds their hearts together.”

Kishiar explained, holding up a piece of paper that seemed entirely ordinary on the surface.

“The content of this agreement is simple. During this mission, you are forbidden from revealing anything you see, hear, or experience to anyone outside of those who are partaking in the mission with you, without permission. If you break the agreement, the magic imbued in this contract will constrict your heart until you are unable to breathe. I believe none of you here would fail to keep such a secret, but in case of uncertainty, anyone who feels unable is welcome to step back. I promise to send you off without a word.”

The phrase ‘unable to breathe’ essentially meant death. While everyone was frozen, Yuder was the first to step forward toward the contract that Kishiar pulled out. There was no hesitation.

“I’ll sign first.”

“Go ahead.”

Upon closer inspection, it was a contract made directly by the Pearl Tower. In other words, it was the most reputable and powerful contract anywhere in the continent.

No further preparations were needed to sign. After reading the contents, one simply needed to place a finger on the contract. The magic sprouting from the paper enveloped the body, and everything was finished in an instant.

Once Yuder casually finished signing and stepped back, Gakane, who had been wearing a stern expression, swallowed hard, made a determined face, and stepped forward.

“I’ll go next.”

Seeing that the process was nothing to worry about seemed to put everyone at ease, and they each took their turns. Finally, even General Gino, with his stoic face, signed. After that, Kishiar rolled up the contract and tucked it back into his pocket.

“Now, go and rest. We’ll depart early tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll show you to your quarters.”

“That would be good. I’d like to hear more about what’s been happening here from the General. Who knows when we’ll meet again?”

At Kishiar’s words, a smile finally appeared on the stern-faced General’s face.

“I’ve been waiting for your arrival, and I have prepared a fine local wine for you. I’ll make sure to bring it.”

Kishiar, guided by General Gino, headed to his quarters. The Peletta Knights and Cavalry members, following the General’s orders, trailed a young soldier who had just arrived towards a small village near the base.

“Follow me.”

‘…He seems familiar.’

Yuder watched the back of the young soldier guiding them, lost in thought. Although the soldier wasn’t a Cavalry member, he felt as if he had seen him somewhere before. Could he have met him among the people he knew in the past?

If he heard the name, he might remember, but it had been a full 11 years since the time he could recall. He might be misremembering.

‘Let’s keep observing for now. If I keep watching, I might remember.’

The village, which was only about 10 minutes away, was bustling with life - unbelievable for a place nestled in the mountains. The

others seemed taken aback, but Yuder had a hunch about the reason.

‘It must have been a regular village, sustaining itself with hunting and gathering.’

The Airic mountain range was as vast as the nickname, the backbone of the continent, suggested. This village was a considerable distance from where Yuder originally lived.

But people’s way of life was generally the same anywhere. Mountain villages were typically sparsely populated, and the influence of local lords barely reached them.

However, the situation must have changed when the Red Stone fell nearby two years ago, attracting a host of soldiers.

An army couldn’t move for free. A large number of them had stayed in one place for two whole years without engaging in combat or particular activities.

By providing places to eat, drink, and stay for them, this small village must have quickly become a bustling place full of money circulation.

‘Of course, the glory would fade once Kishiar retrieves the Red Stone.’

There would be no reason for the army to stay once the Red Stone was retrieved. So, the bustling life of the village didn’t seem very joyous to Yuder.

“Why are there so many people here?”

“Most are soldiers on break. Instead of continuously performing challenging surveillance tasks scattered across the vast mountains,

they get to relax here, drink, socialize, and have some free time. It's General Gino's consideration."

In response to Kanna's question, the guiding soldier provided an answer that matched Yuder's guess.

"Hey, Sunz. Where are you taking these strangers?"

At that moment, a group of men boisterously drinking at an outdoor table waved and called out to the young soldier.

The young soldier momentarily dropped his solemn military demeanor, turning towards the men with a youthful smile.

"I'm on a mission. I need to escort these guests, who came to see the General, to their lodging."

"Alright. Join us when you're done. The card game isn't as fun without you, Sunz."

"Save that for later."

The off-duty soldiers, dressed in civilian clothes, roared with laughter, seemingly intoxicated. The young soldier, looking slightly embarrassed, apologized to Yuder and his party.

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Chapter 27

“My apologies. We’ve spent two years here doing nothing but patrol duty, so discipline is a bit lax among us. It’s the alcohol talking, I hope you understand.”

There were many soldiers in the Cavalry who were used to such a scene, most of them commoners, and they didn’t say a word. Yuder was the same. However, it was a bit surprising that the Peletta knights, whom he had thought would uphold their knightly duties and say something, merely nodded without uttering a word.

He had thought they followed Lord Kishiar without bias, but he began to think that perhaps there was something more to them.

‘Anyway, the soldier who guided us was named Sunz. Sunz… Sunz…’

Yuder tried to recall from his memory someone with the name or surname Sunz, but he couldn’t quite remember. Just as he thought it might have been a misunderstanding, Sunz stopped in front of a building located in a less populated area.

“This is the lodging we prepared for you. It’s small, but most buildings here are. It should be sufficient for a few nights’ rest.”

“Thank you.”

On behalf of everyone, Gakane expressed gratitude.

“Don’t mention it. But if I may ask… the noble person who went with the general earlier, is he really Duke Peletta?”

Sunz asked cautiously, his face betraying an eagerness that he’d been trying to suppress.

“Yes, he is.”

The guide from the Peletta knights answered simply, prompting Sunz to open his eyes wide in surprise.

“I knew it! My goodness, I never thought I’d see a descendant of the Sun God in my lifetime. You all are… the Peletta Knights following him, right?”

Sunz’s excited gaze darted back and forth between the Peletta knights and the Cavalry members, failing to hide his excitement over his flushed cheeks.

Yuder saw the knight guide from the Peletta Knights looking back at him with a troubled expression, as if asking what he should reply.

It seemed like he was having trouble deciding how to explain the yet-unknown existence of the Cavalry to Sunz, but there really wasn’t anything complicated about it.

Once this operation was over, the existence of the cavalry would naturally become widely known. High-ranking individuals including General Gino already knew of their presence here, so there was no reason to hesitate. Yuder quietly opened his mouth.

“These five here are knights from the Peletta Knights. And we are members of the Cavalry.”

“Yuder.”

Gakane’s eyes rose in concern and caution, questioning whether it was okay to reveal so easily. But Yuder remained calm.

“By Cavalry, do you mean… the group that the Emperor recently announced he was recruiting, those who’ve gained power from the Red Stone… It’s true then.”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t expect to meet you so soon.”

There was no sign of aversion towards the Cavalry in Sunz’s expression. He simply seemed genuinely fascinated, then looked at Yuder as if something occurred to him.

“Ah, if you are those people, you should be careful when wandering around the village.”

‘Village? Why?’ Yuder wondered.

A look of confusion crept onto Yuder’s face, and Sunz scratched his head, flashing an awkward smile.

“Well… many of the resting soldiers possess abilities like you all. There was even one among those you saw earlier.”

“What? Really?”

Both Eldore siblings exclaimed in unison, their eyes sparkling with interest. Sunz simply nodded in agreement, “Yes.”

“The abilities aren’t that extraordinary, but we’ve never seen others with abilities outside of our group, so if everyone found out about you, it’d probably cause a commotion. We have quite a few in our Southern Army who are crazy about fighting.”

“Even so… why didn’t those with abilities apply for the Cavalry test?”

Kanna asked in a puzzled tone.

“I don’t think there was a rule that soldiers can’t take the test…”

“You’re right.”

Sunz agreed with Kanna's words.

"But just because there's no rule doesn't mean you can just rush in recklessly. There was no guarantee of success, and we're quite content with our current lifestyle. We thought there would be many others who felt the same way."

'Hold on.'

Yuder sensed something in Sunz's words. When one says 'we', it usually includes the speaker.

"Are you, by any chance, one of those ability users?"

"Ah, yes."

Sunz slowly nodded, seemingly realizing his slip-up late. Yuder, refined through many years, was somewhat skilled in detecting powerful individuals in his vicinity, but this didn't necessarily mean he had the precision of a magic-user or an Awakener with a detection ability.

He hadn't sensed any formidable aura from Sunz, so the idea that Sunz was an ability user hadn't crossed his mind. Before Yuder could ask about his ability, Hinn, with a look of curiosity, beat him to it.

"What ability do you have?"

"Really, it's nothing much. Just a little thing… I can see what's hidden behind. It's a handy ability when playing card games."

'A Vision ability user?'

At that moment, Yuder finally remembered where he had seen the name Sunz before.

'Right. Sunz… Sunz……. So that was it.'

Just as Sunz had said, there certainly were awakened individuals who already had jobs. Among those who, despite having abilities sufficient to join the Cavalry, chose not to, the majority were typically in the military.

Around the time General Gino Bordelli retired long ago, they gathered and formed a new unit within the army. The man who became the leader of that unit was none other than Sunz.

It was a secretive establishment, so there wasn't even a proper inaugural ceremony. He had only heard about it through the military grapevine, but he remembered the name clearly. There was no doubt.

The person who felt the most unpleasant surprise upon hearing of the unit's establishment was Yuder himself, the representative of the Cavalry, which was why he couldn't forget him.

'If my memory serves me right, his full name is Sunz Messial.'

That special unit, composed of awakened individuals within the military, remained low-key, almost non-existent, from its establishment until the moment Yuder died.

Thus, Yuder concluded that they were not a threat to the Cavalry, but were created to separate from the regular soldiers in the military. He put aside his unpleasant feelings and focused on his main tasks.

However, while imprisoned and facing death, Yuder came to realize for the first time that perhaps he had been mistaken.

The soldiers who had captured him, tortured him, and kept a constant vigil were not ordinary. Though the Mana Hole had been destroyed, rendering him unable to use his abilities or recognize other ability users, he knew the men watching him were not ordinary, considering he was once the commander of the Cavalry.

Those who captured him had kept a strict guard until his dying moment, fearing he might escape or regain a shred of his power.

Even during his tortured, disoriented imprisonment, Yuder desperately strained his ears, trying to hear what the others were saying. It was then that he picked up the name of that special unit.

The Emperor no longer trusted the Cavalry. The only force he controlled like his own limbs was this special unit. Due to their role in this ‘Great Hunt’, they would receive greater rewards, guarantees of honor and position.

When Yuder heard these conversations, whispered joyfully among the soldiers, all hope was lost. An intense premonition that there was no longer a way for him to survive filled him with bitterness.

Of course, the ‘Great Hunt’ they referred to was Yudrain Aile.

He didn’t know who had established that special unit that he had thought so little of, when, or for what purpose. He couldn’t identify where his information had been compromised.

But now, if he met the representative of that special unit, things would change.

The special unit had not yet been created, and its representative was stuck in some corner of the Airic Mountains, a soldier as ordinary as they came. Now, in this condition, it would be easy to eliminate him in advance. If Sunz was killed, the future would definitely change!

Yuder tried to muster the strength to kill the man before him. But when he met the unambitious black eyes of the man looking at him, the power he had gathered wavered and dispersed in an instant.

“…Did I say something strange?”

“Yuder. What’s wrong? You look stern.”

From beside the confused Sunz, Gakane patted his shoulder and spoke in a low voice. Yuder then sighed, feeling the last of his rage vanish.

‘…What was I thinking?’

During his life, he had killed many and made many kneel. His subordinates had called him a stubborn devil with nothing but brute strength, but even then, he had a few principles he had set for himself.

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Chapter 28

Unless commanded by the emperor, one should not arbitrarily use their power to kill; if possible, spare lives and secure surrenders. Do not punish those who have not yet committed a crime without evidence. As the leader of the Cavalry, prioritize the cavalry and the empire over personal safety. That was roughly it.

Those who possessed power far greater than others could, with a mere flick of a finger, cause great turmoil in others' lives. Therefore, they should not move recklessly without clear guidelines.

Killing and defeating someone arbitrarily might be easy, but living that way would soon lead to major problems in areas that could not be resolved with power alone.

Make judgments more rationally than anyone else, but when power must be used, do so overwhelmingly.

The one who had thoroughly ingrained this fact in Yuder's mind was Kishiar La Orr, who around this time would be enjoying a drink with General Gino.

'…It's easy to kill Sunz now. But will the future really change if I do, leading to the creation of a special force?'

Yuder took a deep breath and thought rationally.

'If the representative changes, that's it. But if I spare Sunz… I can understand the movements of the talented ones in the army through him, and when the future of the special force comes, I can connect more tightly.'

It made more rational sense to spare him and create a connection. After repeating this several times, the conflict finally

subsided and his mind calmed. Yuder looked around with a much more relaxed expression.

“It’s nothing. Vision ability, a rare ability we don’t have in our cavalry. I was just surprised.”

“Is that so?”

Sunz tilted his head, smiling as if relieved.

“If there are other talented individuals here besides you, could I perhaps get introduced?”

“It’s impossible to introduce everyone. Some are on duty…”

“Knowing about those resting in the village would be enough. You don’t have to worry, it’s just personal curiosity.”

Yuder also smiled to reassure him. Sunz nodded without much suspicion.

“No problem. Anyway, after guiding you to your quarters, my work ends, and you will have free time. If you want to meet other Awakeners in our army, let’s go together after you’ve unpacked in the quarters.”

“Understood.”

After all, the retrieval of the Red Stone was led by Kishiar, so there was nothing Yuder needed to worry about. It was fortunate that he found an unexpected connection here, which eliminated any chance of boredom.

Ignoring the puzzled looks from the others, Yuder followed Sunz’s lead and arrived at their quarters.

“This is where you will stay. Once you’ve unpacked, feel free to roam around.”

There were a total of two buildings for their accommodation. One was for the Peletta Knights and the other was for the Cavalry.

However, because the buildings were so small and only had two bedrooms, they needed to divide the members before unpacking.

“Are there any second-gender Awakener here?”

Hinn stepped forward and looked at the rest of the members.

“Finn and I are both non-manifested-Awakener.”

“I am also a non-manifested-Awakener.”

After Kanna answered, she turned her gaze towards Yuder. He nodded lightly to indicate he was the same. This naturally left only Gakane. He scratched his head, seeming somewhat perplexed under the scrutiny of four pairs of eyes.

“I am… an alpha Awakener.”

“Really? Then it doesn’t matter if we divide by only one gender. Kanna and I will take one room. Is that okay?”

Hinn entered the lodging with Kanna’s hand in hers, without waiting for an answer. Naturally, the remaining room was left to the three men.

‘So, Gakane was an alpha awakener.’

As Yuder entered the room, he mulled over the newly discovered information. He had assumed that Gakane was also a non-manifested awakener, as he had never spoken up when people around him were discussing the second gender. It was surprising that he was not.

‘It’s fortunate to know this now. After all, I might manifest the same way as before…’

Yuder hadn’t forgotten the memories of when he had manifested as an omega. It was one of the most intense experiences in his life, something he could never forget.

The process of manifesting a second gender was bearable, albeit painful. The critical point was that there shouldn’t be an Awakener of the opposite second gender present during the manifestation.

Until now, this fact had not been well known, and Awakeners rarely gathered closely, so it didn’t matter. But after the formation of the Cavalry, a large group of Awakeners, many things changed.

Up to this point, those who had manifested their second gender were usually those who had awakened their abilities at the same time. But problems often occurred when, after a long time following the awakening of abilities, the second gender manifested late.

Yuder was one of those Awakeners who had unexpectedly experienced this after joining the Cavalry, unaware of the fact. Therefore, he knew all too well the potential problems that could arise.

‘…I need to inform Kishiar about this along with the other Awakeners in the military.’

So far, he had not seen any members who had suffered due to related issues after joining. However, he didn’t know what the future would hold, so it was necessary to prepare a contingency plan.

If Kishiar asked where he had learned this information, he would have to dodge the question. But even at the risk of arousing suspicion, it was crucial to inform him beforehand.

As Yuder pondered this and entered the room to put down his bag, Finn left the room to find the bathroom.

After discarding his uniform coat and lying down on the bed, Gakane exhaled a long sigh and opened his mouth.

“Yuder. Why do you suddenly want to visit the other Awakeners in the military?”

“Just because. I got curious.”

“But you didn’t pay much attention to our peers in the Cavalry.”

Being criticized out of nowhere, Yuder let out a hollow laugh as he looked down at Gakane.

“Well, I already know you guys well. But they are different.”

“What’s different?”

“Think about it. There are several Awakeners in the military who have unknown abilities, just like us.”

At Yuder’s words, Gakane nodded with a naive expression like a boy.

“So what? There must be people with abilities who did not deliberately apply to the Cavalry.”

“That might not have mattered if this place wasn’t a military.”

Among the mages of the Pearl Tower, and even within the court mages and the Imperial Knights, there undoubtedly existed Awakeners. They simply had not revealed themselves yet.

However, their numbers were inherently limited, unlike the army. The Southern Army alone, led by General Gino, boasted an impressive number.

Even if only a fraction of them were Awakeners, when gathered together, their numbers would not pale in comparison to the Cavalry.

“But if the Cavalry begins to fully exert their power, how long can they continue to live as they do now, ordinarily?”

“Do you mean to suggest that the higher-ups in the army might try to create a second Cavalry?”

Although he did not elaborate, Gakane’s eyes momentarily flickered, as if he had an inkling from this hint alone.

“What would you do?”

“If it were me… No, I suppose I might entertain such a thought.”

For a moment, Gakane struggled between disbelief and a chilling realization before finally rising from his seat, looking at Yuder with an admiring gaze.

“So, you’re trying to gather as much information as possible. That’s impressive. I never even considered it.”

Gakane Bolunwald, too, would have thought of this naturally if he had weathered all the storms at the top of the enormous organization known as the Cavalry for nearly ten years.

‘Besides, even if he were in the same situation, he might not have thought of murder like I just did.’

Gakane had talent. Considering his relentless personality, good looks, and lineage, he could have been a much better leader than him if he had become the captain.

If he were still alive, Kishiar might not have chosen him as his successor. While he couldn’t say what Gakane himself would have thought, Yuder held his abilities in high esteem.

He never thought he’d agree with the words of others in his old memories who regretted the premature death of such a promising

talent. He gave a bitter smile inwardly and bowed his head.

“I’m not trying to do anything that grand.”

“Were you two friends before you joined the Cavalry?”

Finn Eldore, who had opened the door and returned, interrupted and asked. Gakane had apparently had a good deal of conversation with the Eldore siblings on the way there, but Yuder had hardly ever had a personal conversation with them.

“We stayed at the same place before the test. Yuder helped me out.”

“Is that how you got to know Kanna too?”

“Well, that’s…”

“I’ll go out now.”

Yuder took off his uniform coat like Gakane. He then returned to his usual civilian attire. As he opened the door to leave, Gakane looked at him worriedly.

“Even though Sunz is with you, be careful, Yuder. We need to leave early tomorrow, so try to come back as soon as possible.”

“Wow. At your age, you sound like a parent who already has a child?”

“That’s not what I…”

As he listened to the conversation between Finn and Gakane, Yuder chuckled and closed the door.

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Chapter 29

“I apologize for being late. Let’s go.”

Upon speaking to Sunz, who had been waiting outside the lodging, he nodded and began to walk ahead with a relaxed stride.

“By the way, what should I call you?”

“Just call me Yuder.”

“Alright, Yuder. You can simply call me Sunz.”

Sunz chuckled, stating that he disliked being called by his rank as it was too stiff.

“I’ve been trapped here for two years, it feels good to have a new friend after so long.”

“Have you been here since the Red Stone fell?”

Yuder decided to ask the question that had been on his mind, and Sunz responded candidly.

“That’s right. Originally, I was in the Southern Army in the Gulcan region under Airic. But after that incident, all the troops nearby were summoned. Since then, our numbers have been gradually increasing, until General Gino arrived a few months ago.”

“It must have been boring.”

“It was and it wasn’t. These days, whenever it gets boring, someone awakens. Watching the newly awakened individual’s abilities, and fulfilling our duties, time surprisingly flies.”

Sunz smiled, expressing that this was preferable to facing threats to his life while serving on the front lines. However, Yuder caught something unusual in his words.

“Do you mean that Awakeners have been continuously emerging among the soldiers?”

“Yes. Isn’t it the same in other regions?”

Well, if you looked at it regionally, that was true. But the frequency as mentioned by Sunz was not common.

‘…Could it be because we’re closer to where the red stone fell?’

Yuder thought it was a highly plausible hypothesis. After the Red Stone fell, Awakeners began to emerge across the continent, but the highest number was from the Orr Empire.

And, even within the Empire, the central region had a higher ratio. Considering the Airic mountains, where the Red Stone fell, stretched across the central region, it was a significant ratio.

If one assumed that there was some kind of power emanating from the stone, the soldiers who had stayed here for two years had more exposure to that power than anyone else.

The fact that an Awakener appeared every time they almost forgot about it could be some evidence of the power the stone possessed.

‘Did the previous Kishiar not know this fact?’

Yuder silently sorted out his thoughts as he followed Sunz toward the village center where off-duty soldiers were gathered.

Despite being a small village, it had a well-established tavern, restaurant, and market. At first glance, there were several soldiers

who seemed out of place among the villagers.

“Hey! Sunz. Are you done?”

“Yeah. But where did Emon, who was here earlier, go?”

Those still playing cards at the outdoor table waved at Sunz. Upon scanning their faces and not finding the person he was looking for, Sunz asked. Someone immediately pointed at a nearby building and answered loudly.

“That guy said card games were boring and went to the tavern over there.”

“I see. Let’s go check it out.”

Yuder followed Sunz towards the tavern. Despite it not being late, the place was bustling. Sunz explained that the soldiers often gathered here regardless of the time, as they had nothing else to do and enjoyed sharing stories.

“It’s a tavern in name, but during the day, we serve ordinary food and drinks too.”

“Understood.”

As he said, most of the patrons, seated in a spot well-lit by the sun, were drinking mundane beverages with bored expressions on their faces.

Several individuals inside greeted Sunz upon recognizing him. He acknowledged their greetings with a brief explanation.

“That friend awoke his powers a year ago. His strength is comparable to that of a bear. And there’s another one over there. That guy can jump as high as a city wall, if I recall correctly…?”

Most of the people he introduced possessed powers that enhanced their physical bodies. Yuder examined their faces carefully, wondering if any of them had detained him in the past, but he didn't recognize any of them.

"Ah, and there's Emon over there. He's the one I've paired up with the most for duties. He's a bit rough around the edges, but a decent fellow. Emon!"

"Ah, Sunz. You finally arrived."

A man who was engaged in a dice game at a table with others inside the tavern looked up. He was one of the men who had recognized Sunz earlier on their way to the quarters.

"But who's the person behind you? I've never seen him before… A new recruit?"

"No, he's one of the people I showed around earlier."

Emon, apparently having not recognized Yuder due to his change of attire, looked surprised.

"Ah, I see. I'm sorry for not recognizing you. Why are you here…?"

"I wanted to look around, so I asked for permission. I'll be leaving soon."

His answer suggested that it was fine to ignore him as he didn't want to cause any discomfort. Emon watched Yuder with a strange expression for a moment before nodding and returning his attention to the dice game.

"Emon's ability is…"

Just as Sunz was about to explain Emon’s power, a noisy commotion arose from behind. It was the tavern owner, appearing with a tray piled high with grilled sausages.

He placed the tray on the table where the dice game was taking place and flashed a friendly smile.

“Here are the snacks you ordered. Enjoy them while you play. I’ve also thrown in some dried jerky on the house.”

“Awesome!”, “I love the sausages made by the owner here.”

The dice players cheered in unison and reached for the tray. As the mountain of sausages rapidly dwindled, the dice game took a brief pause.

Yuder saw Emon, who had stepped back a few paces, take out a small cloth pouch from his pocket and fill an old portable pipe with dried herb leaves. He didn’t seem interested in eating the sausages.

A moment later, a small flame, like a spark from flint, ignited inside the pipe. A fragrant yet sharp smell spread as the smoke wafted out.

“That’s Emon’s power. He can create fire. It’s quite unique among those who awakened their powers here.”

“I see.”

As Yuder nodded, Emon turned his head, seemingly having overheard the conversation.

“What? You’re not here just to look around, but to scrutinize the Awakeners?”

“He’s just like us. He was curious, so I was explaining things to him.”

Before Yuder could respond, Sunz answered first. Fortunately, Emon didn’t seem overly curious about Yuder’s identity.

“Ah, I see? Then you must have noticed that we don’t have any exceptionally powerful individuals here. After all, the best I can do is light my pipe with a tiny flame.”

With a snicker, Emon lifted his index finger, and a small flame flickered and popped on its tip. Yuder stared at it before speaking.

“That flame, can you not sustain it?”

“I can’t. If I could, it might be more useful, but I’m content with having the freedom to light my pipe at any time without a flame. It’s something I didn’t have before.”

“Still, it’s a useful ability. When we pair up for patrol duties and climb the mountain, at least we won’t have to shiver all night because we can’t light a fire.”

“Yeah. Thanks to you, I can avoid places where there might be monsters or wild beasts at night. It’s just that simple.”

Emon shrugged nonchalantly at Sunz’s praise, a slow smile gracing his face. Sunz let out a laugh.

Meanwhile, Yuder’s gaze on them cooled.

‘They have no idea of the potential their abilities hold.’

This world was still completely ignorant of the potential and characteristics of the Awakeners’ abilities. Even the Awakeners themselves were in the dark.

Once an ability was awakened, it didn’t just stop there. It was given endless opportunities to grow alongside its owner. Even an

ability that seemed insignificant could be developed into a formidable power, depending on how much effort the owner put into it.

‘Besides, most of them have abilities that are quite useful, even if they don’t develop them further.’

Most of the soldiers introduced by Sunz had physical enhancement abilities.

Although they hardly needed to use them in this place, where their main adversaries were the occasional lost wild beasts or monsters, such abilities would truly shine on a battlefield. There was a high chance of explosive growth as well.

‘The same goes for Sunz’s vision ability. For now, it only allows him to see through obstacles and perceive things day or night, but that alone can provide a major advantage in combat. Its potential for development is enormous.’

Emon’s flame was similar. Although it was small and lasted only for an instant, it had the advantage of being conjurable immediately, regardless of location, whenever its owner wished.

There were members in the cavalry who could manipulate fire, but most of them either took quite a bit of time to summon fire or had a mediocre duration.

In this respect, Emon’s flame was an extremely useful ability, perfect for launching surprise attacks while engaging in close combat with enemies.

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Chapter 30

‘In a few years, information about the development of abilities will be known to the world. They, too, will come to realize the potential of the power they possess. Being in the military would have been an even better environment for further development.’

Perhaps it wouldn’t hurt to drop a few hints early and win their favor.

Yuder was a person who had managed to advance a power related to attributes, which was notoriously difficult to develop, to several levels and reached the top.

There was a saying that no one understood the mechanism of the abilities possessed by the Awakeners better than Yuder Aile, the Commander of the Cavalry.

The potential for future development, which even the Awakeners themselves had not yet realized, appeared as clear to Yuder’s eyes as reading the branches of a handprint.

He quickly came to a decision and opened his mouth.

“In my opinion, it’s a very impressive ability, but you seem to underestimate your power.”

“Underestimate? Didn’t you just see it? It’s a flame that can’t even singe a single hair of a monster. What’s so impressive about it?”

Emon laughed as if he’d heard a funny joke, waving the pipe emitting smoke in his hand. Yuder, without a hint of a smile, opened his mouth again.

“You might feel that way if you’re trying to singe a monster’s hair. But what if you sparked your flame in a monster’s eye or mouth during a fight?”

“…”

Emon’s pipe, which he had been lightly shaking, stopped. The casual smile on Sunz’s face also disappeared in an instant.

“Your flame is like a spark from a flint, short and bursting powerfully. It’s not like a big fire that you have to worry about maintaining - you can keep trying as needed.”

Yuder looked straight at them as he continued.

“If you get used to summoning the flame more quickly, more frequently, like striking a flint repeatedly, you could potentially ignite dozens, if not hundreds of places simultaneously. Do you still feel your power is insignificant?”

“…I’ve…never thought about it that way.”

Emon stammered, his face aghast.

“Try it if you haven’t. That much will undoubtedly be possible soon. And Sunz.”

“Oh, yes!”

Sunz, who had been watching the lesson Yuder was giving Emon, instinctively responded with military precision.

It was as if he was in the presence of a superior, but none of the three found anything odd about it.

“The ability to locate enemies in the darkness is an impressive reconnaissance skill. Regularly practice feeling beyond what you see with your eyes closed. As your senses become sharper, your ability

will gradually develop. You might be able to extend the range of your vision or even selectively see only what you want to.”

“Close my eyes… and practice?”

“If you don’t understand what I mean, try closing your eyes now.”

Yuder’s words carried the persuasive power forged from long years of serving as a commander. For some reason, Sunz felt as though he was obeying an order and unwittingly closed his eyes.

“Do you see anything?”

“No, not now. Nothing at all…..”

“When you use your ability, do you have to concentrate hard?”

“Yes. How did you….”

It was obvious. Even an ordinary person without any Vision ability would need to concentrate to look closely at something. Much more so for someone whose ability was precisely that. Yuder had seen many like them before.

“You should start practicing the ability to focus instantly when necessary. Anyway, I’m going to hold up a few fingers in front of your face. Try to concentrate and guess how many there are.”

“… Eh? Just like that, out of the blue?”

“I’m doing it now. How many do you feel?”

“Wait, give me a moment.”

Yuder didn’t give Sunz a moment to think, he immediately held up three fingers in front of his face. Sunz began to fuss, pressing his lips tightly together and furrowing his brow. A very faint ripple of energy emanated from around him.

“Try to guess before I count down from 5 is over. 5, 4, 3……”

“Wait a moment. I’m still……”

“2, 1. How many?”

“2… No, 3?”

Sunz mumbled in a resigned tone. However, he was correct. Yuder chuckled, seeing Emon’s wide-eyed expression from the corner of his eye.

“Open your eyes.”

“……What?”

Sunz opened his eyes to see three fingers right in front of him, and his face turned pale.

“You guessed correctly.”

“But it was so sudden… Maybe it was just luck.”

“No, you were correct.”

Yuder asserted with conviction.

“Doubting yourself only makes it harder to fully utilize such abilities. Have confidence.”

“But still……”

“Both of you might think what I’m saying sounds odd. But I’ve been observing people with these abilities for a while now, and I’m still doing so. Believe what I say.”

Upon hearing Yuder’s words, both men looked at each other with peculiar expressions. They seemed unsure about how to interpret

this strange conversation that had abruptly taken place.

‘Of course, they would be surprised and confused. But I need to change their perception of their abilities too.’

Yuder looked at both of them and began to speak.

“Your abilities are far from useless. I can bet anything that important people will soon find your abilities necessary.”

“Important people? Who are they? No one has sought us out in two years.”

Emon muttered as he tapped the ash from his pipe.

“We’re just ordinary soldiers. There must be countless people with abilities like ours throughout the Orr Empire, right? Like that… what was it? The Cavalry that the Emperor just recruited.”

“You’re well informed. Why do you think the Cavalry was recruited? Because they were needed.”

They may have been overlooked for two years, but in other words, it was only two years.

The past two years, a time when there was no Cavalry, was a period when people were on edge and struggled to adapt to the emergence of individuals with new abilities.

And now that the adaptation was over, a new world was about to unfold. A world that, for now, only Yuder knew about.

“The world doesn’t yet understand the value of these powers. But that will soon change. When the moment comes that many people realize their worth, it will inevitably change.”

“Do you really believe that?”

Sunz tilted his head and asked. He still seemed skeptical.

‘Responding with an immediate affirmation might make me seem like a demagogue.’

So Yuder just smiled quietly.

“…If you are unaware of the power you possess, you won’t be able to properly use it when it’s needed the most. Know your strength well until someone who needs it appears, and don’t belittle its worth. If you trivialize your own power, others will regard it as even more insignificant.”

At Yuder’s words, both Sunz and Emon fell into deep thought simultaneously. As soldiers, they were taught that it was a virtue to obediently follow orders from above, and to unconditionally obey their generals and emperor. This concept might have been difficult for them to understand immediately.

However, they needed to grasp this in order to shake off the deeply ingrained military spirit, and change the situation when the special forces are eventually formed.

“…Well, you might be right. If I belittle my strength, others would find it even more laughable. I didn’t think about that part because it was always that way with the guys here from the start.”

Emon, looking at his extinguished pipe, lifted one corner of his lips.

“If we improve the way we use our power through training as you suggest, our situation, which hasn’t shown signs of promotion for years, might get better.”

In the Orr Empire, the military was perceived as nothing more than a group under the knights, who possessed enormous power, merely filling up the numbers.

After humans were able to use mana and aura, wars were always about those who could wield such powers.

There was a time in the ancient past when tactics and individual soldiers' skills mattered, but no one thought of that anymore. It had been long since winning was about whether a swordmaster or a great mage was on our side.

In the end, the main tasks of the Orr Empire's Imperial Army could not be exaggerated as merely defending the borders, maintaining public order, and dealing with troublesome monsters.

Even though the high-ranking officers who commanded the military were of noble birth, they did not regard their positions as ones of real power.

Only the generals who commanded the southern and northern armies, in turn, held their positions as swordmasters, using them as stepping stones to enhance their honor and grasp higher power.

Like General Gino Bordelli, the rare case of maintaining the general's position for a long time was only possible when one had outstanding skills and a clean and incorruptible disposition without any ambition for promotion.

Despite this, the reason why commoners kept joining the military was simple. They could earn a stable income without suffering from a lord's exploitation, and it was one of the few opportunities for commoners to travel around leaving their hometowns.

Those who applied for the military were usually children pushed out from poor commoner families to reduce the number of mouths to feed.

Being able to join the military was a slightly better situation. Those who couldn't often ended up in mercenary bands or did menial jobs at the lower echelons of the market until they died.

Occasionally, even though they were commoners, if they showed an extraordinary talent for martial arts during training, they could rise to a fairly high rank. However, such events were so rare throughout the thousand-year history of the Empire that they could be counted on one hand.

Yuder guessed that the cause of the lethargic attitude and self-deprecating behavior of the soldiers who had been idling in the mountains for two years was probably due to this.

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Chapter 31

One of the main reasons Yuder had initially paid little mind to the news that a special forces unit was being formed was because he knew the military's morale significantly deteriorated.

The soldiers in front of him lacked confidence in their strength and couldn't imagine a future better than their current circumstances.

How could such people have possibly come together to form a special unit? Could it have been that someone with power secretly helped them establish it by offering a sweet reward? Perhaps someone like the emperor who had promised glory to the special forces while driving Yuder towards death.

Yuder opened his mouth, looking into their eyes.

"This power can certainly be an enormous opportunity. Be sure to understand its value properly so you can grasp the opportunity when it comes. And if you need help with this matter, feel free to seek me out at any time."

"You seem to know more about this power than we do… but how are we to know who to look for?"

Emon asked with a hesitant expression. Instead of replying, Yuder picked up a metal fork that was lying on the table.

A moment later, a thin stream of water swirled above the fork, forming a beautiful spiral. Upon witnessing this, Emon and Sunz's eyes widened in astonishment.

"I am Yuder of the Cavalry."

Yuder purposely didn’t mention his rank. It was likely to win him more favor from them.

“I’ve only been in the Cavalry for a few months myself. I’m not much different from you all. However, I believe in the future that this power can bring about. I hope that you too will come to understand its true value.”

That was all. There were no ulterior motives. By stating this upfront, he preemptively eliminated any potential for misinterpretation.

Yuder stood up, looking at Sunz and Emon, who had stunned expressions. He had seen all he needed to see. It was time to leave.

“Thank you for showing me around the village, Sunz. I’ll be on my way now.”

“Ah…”

Yuder turned his back before Sunz could speak. Young soldiers were laughing raucously, completely oblivious to what had transpired at the corner table.

Even after he had left, the two men behind him sat in silence for a long time, unable to utter a word.

—

The next day, the Cavalry, together with the Knights of Peletta, all left their lodgings at dawn. Kishiar was waiting for them in front of the base they had seen last night, alongside General Gino.

“I’m not sure if you all managed to get a good rest last night.”

Despite the fact that he had said he was going to drink with General Gino, Kishiar looked completely unweary.

“As I mentioned yesterday, we will start retrieving the Red Stone from today. For today, we will identify the location of the stone and assess the extent to which we can approach it, and gather information.”

Yesterday, General Gino had said that a strange energy was emanating from the Red Stone, making it difficult for ordinary people to even approach it.

However, people who were skilled enough to use Aura, particularly General Gino, could approach it quite closely. The Cavalry could not predict how they would perceive this.

“If during the journey, anyone feels it’s too difficult to approach due to the strange phenomena caused by the stone, they should stop walking and report to me before starting their descent. There is no shame in descending. That, too, will be helpful in gathering information.”

‘Well, with General Gino, the Swordmaster, by our side, we wouldn’t need to worry about the nuisances.’

Yuder reinterpreted Kishiar’s words from his own perspective. Kishiar’s rhetorical skills, able to sugarcoat any message, were still amazing.

If Yuder had been in that position, he would have bluntly told the nuisances to immediately descend and stay out of the way.

‘If they get into trouble while descending, or after they have descended, I would have threatened them, saying I won’t let them off easily.’

“Now, let’s move.”

Despite many people’s concerns, Kishiar said he would lead the way. He did say that he would keep General Gino right behind him,

but the Pelleta Knights, who had the duty to protect him, showed clear signs of anxiety. Yuder, knowing Kishiar's ability, was not very worried.

'Rather… I should find the right moment to say I want to talk, but I wonder when that would be.'

Kishiar moved forward without hesitation, as if he knew the path ahead. His steps were light, like those of a man out for a stroll. If it weren't for the divine sword hanging at his waist, one might truly believe it.

Not long after they began walking, the traces of human footsteps gradually disappeared. The birds that had been chirping from the trees also became invisible, leaving only the dense forest and the occasional sound of the wind.

'So far, I don't feel anything unusual.'

Yuder was keenly observing the aura surrounding them as he moved.

The steep uphill began, but the Cavalry, who had undergone rigorous training, ascended the mountain without showing any signs of fatigue. Yuder felt as if he was returning home, which was quite invigorating.

'After all, having grown up in the same mountain range, it's not an exaggeration to say that I've returned home.'

The clear and majestic energy of the Airic Mountain Range, which he hadn't walked in a long time, seemed to welcome Yuder.

To the Yuder of eleven years ago, it would have been a few months since he last visited, but the current Yuder, who had lived and died without setting foot in his hometown for a very long time, was experiencing this feeling after a long time.

Before joining the cavalry, he would wander these mountains alone, chopping wood and digging up medicinal herbs. He spent his days endlessly repeating the cycle of wandering all day and returning home to rest before sunset. He never felt lonely living alone. Probably.

Others asked how he could live alone in a mountain teeming with monsters and wild beasts, but Yuder never found the mountain scary. It must have been his natural disposition.

Even though he was much more naive than he is now, the essence of Yuder back then wasn't much different from the present.

'A creepy human who only knows himself, ignorant of emotions.'

Yuder recalled the words others used to describe him during his youth.

Would those who couldn't even meet his gaze out of fear back then say the same about the current Cavalry and Yuder?

"There's a spring over there. We'll take a short break."

About two hours into their silent trek up the mountain trail, Kishiar gestured towards a spot and declared it was time for a rest. As he had indicated, there was a spring up ahead, seemingly man-made.

A man-made spring with no signs of recent human activity. It was evidence that until two years ago before the Red Stone fell, humans had relatively free access to this area.

The party members each found a rock or tree stump to sit on and rest. Some approached the spring to drink water. Yuder watched Kanna chatting with the Eldore siblings, thinking that Kanna and Hinn had become quite close since they had shared the same accommodations the night before.

Kishiar was discussing something with General Gino, a map that they'd taken out from their belongings in hand. Would there be an opportunity for a personal conversation with him until they retrieved the Red Stone and returned? If no such opportunity arose, Yuder wondered if he might just have to approach him directly.

"Yuder."

Just then, Gakane sat down next to Yuder. Despite the fast-paced climb up the mountain, Gakane looked perfectly fine, without a single drop of sweat on him.

"Feeling anything yet?"

"No."

"Me neither. Seems like everyone is fine so far."

Could the Red Stone really be up there? Gakane murmured, looking up at the sky. It was a cloudless, clear day.

"Where did you live? Is it far from here?"

"Hmm… It would probably take a few days to get there."

"That's quite far. It would have been nice to drop by if it was closer, after we finish our business."

Yuder studied Gakane's regretful face, trying to understand his intention. Was it just an extension of him inviting Yuder to visit where he lived?

Yuder himself didn't particularly want to visit the place he used to live, so he found Gakane's words hard to understand. If he were to take a vacation, he could visit, but only to tidy up the house.

In the past, when he became a Cavalry Commander, he had tidied up his original house and spent his whole life in the barracks.

He had no longing for the house where he used to live.

“There’s not much… to see there.”

“But it’s where you lived. Don’t you want to go back and see it, even for a little while?”

What would Gakane think if he said no here? Yuder was lost in thought and only noticed the approaching presence behind them later than usual.

“Go back where?”

“Commander.”

As Gakane startled and tried to rise from his seat, Kishiar raised his hand to stop him. He seemed to have finished his conversation with General Gino and was now alone.

“Did you have other business besides the mission?”

“No, no.”

Gakane seemed rather intimidated by Kishiar, their commander. Yuder saw him looking for help and calmly opened his mouth.

“My hometown is around here.”

“Hmm. Your hometown?”

Interest flickered in Kishiar’s red eyes.

“I see. So it’s relatively close, then?”

“Not exactly. The Airic Mountains are quite vast.”

“So you were discussing visiting it if it were nearby.”

Finally, Kishiar seemed to piece together the conversation that had been going on between Gakane and Yuder.

“Yes.”

“I see… Yuder. I remember you didn’t have a family, do you miss your hometown?”

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Chapter 32

“Do you miss your hometown, Yuder?”

Kishiar, as usual, wore a gentle smile.

Yuder didn’t attach much significance to the question. However, Gakane, who was sitting next to him, was incessantly shifting his expressions. He seemed to believe that the commander was scolding Yuder indirectly.

‘Kishiar is not the type to do that. He’s indeed a bit eccentric, but….’

Ah, another unnecessary thought. Yuder shook his head and briefly replied, “No.”

“As you said, I have no family, and no lingering regrets, so I do not miss it. I only feel that I should go back someday to tidy up, as I left without doing so, not knowing I would be accepted into the Cavalry.”

“That’s a valid point. I hadn’t considered it. After we successfully complete this mission, I’ll have to give everyone a few days of leave.”

At Kishiar’s smooth response, Gakane’s eyes widened in surprise.

Not only was Yuder’s audacity to converse so casually with the commander, who held a high noble title, shocking, but so was Kishiar’s easygoing nature. He did not reprimand Yuder for his insolence and even casually mentioned future plans.

“Um… Commander, is that okay?”

“What do you mean?”

Gakane cautiously composed himself and posed the question.

“Deciding on something like a sudden leave for everyone…”

“Of course, it’s okay. I have the discretion to make such decisions. I won’t change my mind, so Gakane, you too should start planning ahead.”

Kishiar gave a slight wink. Gakane had always thought of Kishiar as a person of great dignity, his conduct fitting his imperial lineage. However, seeing Kishiar’s casual demeanor, all thoughts disappeared from Gakane’s mind due to shock.

“I’ll… I’ll go get some water.”

Yuder watched Gakane rise shakily and disappear, guessing the kind of shock he must be feeling.

Those who judged Kishiar by his outward appearance were bound to be shocked by the discrepancy with his true character. Yuder had once been the same.

On the surface, Kishiar might appear as a dignified commander with a handsome face, reflecting his divine lineage, but that was not all there was to Kishiar La Orr.

He was an imperial family member, who never married and maintained an insignificant noble title until his death. He was a womanizer, indiscriminately sowing seeds of scandal with countless individuals.

Now, the newly formed Cavalry needed to establish discipline, so he maintained a calm demeanor externally. However, once you

peeled back one layer of his mask, he casually winked at his subordinates. That was another side of Kishiar.

The Cavalry members would probably have to get used to this aspect of his.

‘Come to think of it… Now that Gakane is gone, this is the only time I can speak privately with Kishiar?’

Despite the lapse in conversation, Kishiar remained seated next to Yuder. After hesitating for a moment, Yuder opened his mouth.

“May I ask you something?”

“Only if it wasn’t about disappointment in my unfitting behavior as a leader.”

Kishiar responded as if he had been waiting. Yuder sighed lightly and shook his head. Could a mere member dare to do so?

“Of course not.”

“Really? You, Yuder, seemed like someone who could.”

What did he mean by someone who could? But Yuder knew well that digging into that here would only waste time.

Pointlessly making unnecessary comments to break down the opponent’s walls and guess their intentions was one of the things Kishiar used to do well in the past.

“Fine. If not, then what are you trying to say?”

“Do you know that among the southern army soldiers who have stayed here for two years guarding the Red Stone, there are unusually many Awakeners?”

As there wasn’t much time, he went straight to the point.

“From what I heard from the soldier who guided us yesterday, the ratio was significantly higher than expected. If you add them all up, there are dozens of Awakeners in these mountains.”

If Kishiar had asked why he suddenly mentioned this, it would have been quite a conundrum as to where to begin the explanation. However, fortunately, he seemed to understand right away what Yuder intended to say.

His playful red eyes immediately became serious.

“…I have never received such a report.”

“I heard they were mostly ordinary soldiers.”

“And they didn’t even apply to the Cavalry.”

Why didn’t they apply to the Cavalry, why didn’t anyone think to report it as an unusual occurrence when there were so many Awakeners, how much had Kishiar realized?

Yuder quietly waited for his response.

“If it’s true, then we need an investigation. Originally, the military is not something I can interfere with, but if what you say is true, this is not a normal situation. The words you just said, they are based on the truth, right?”

“Of course.”

Kishiar’s reaction was more favorable than Yuder had expected. With a calm face, Yuder nodded. It was something that would come out sooner or later if they investigated anyway.

Kishiar, who seemed lost in thought for a moment, stroking his chin, turned his gaze with a soft chuckle as if he had finished sorting things out.

“Well, I didn’t expect that the serious thing you wanted to talk about with such a grave face was this.”

“…”

“I heard you’re not particularly interested in your comrades, but it seems you’re quite interested in the Awakeners?”

“I…”

What should he answer here to smoothly move on and establish a not-so-bad relationship with Kishiar in the future? Underneath his emotionless face, Yuder was having a fierce internal debate.

“It’s not that I’m interested… I just thought it could be dangerous. Since you, the leader, are the one commanding us, I thought it would be best to tell you about matters related to the Awakeners.”

“Dangerous… Unmanaged Awakeners gathered in one organization, it could be.”

It was a fundamental answer, so it probably didn’t feel strange. Kishiar murmured lowly and slowly nodded.

“Interesting. It’s curious that so many Awakeners appeared in this one place. I wonder if it’s because of the Red Stone.”

He turned his gaze towards Yuder as if contemplating something.

“What do you think?”

Yuder maintained a moment of silence. What should he respond? Would it be better to feign ignorance and take a step back in this situation? However, it was him who had brought up a matter that a normal, commoner-originated awakened individual wouldn’t even care about to Kishiar.

‘He seems to want to know how far I’ve thought.’

In that case, he could just show him. After all, Kishiar would have already speculated about what Yuder could answer.

Yuder slowly opened his mouth.

“When the Red Stone fell, its emitted power caused awakenings across the entire continent. If such a powerful force can do that, isn’t it not coincidental that many awakened individuals would come from among those who stayed closer to it for a longer period?”

“Right. I also think the same.”

Kishiar smiled like a teacher who had finally heard the answer he was seeking.

“However, those who haven’t reported to me about the unique awakening ratio among the soldiers here even after two years since the stone fell probably didn’t think that way. You’ve quickly noticed this anomaly and even reported it to me, which is a matter they might have considered insignificant. I admire your ability. Is that observational and judgmental ability part of your awakened ability?”

“…No, you’re flattering me.”

“It’s not flattery. It’s sincere.”

With a single sentence, Kishiar had rated all the soldiers here, including General Gino, as inferior to Yuder. As Yuder hesitated about how to respond, Kishiar’s red eyes sparkled like a clever beast, without a hint of his usual languor.

“Hmm. Indeed.”

“Yes?”

“I proposed before that we should get to know each other better. Would you seriously consider it? I promise you won’t be

disappointed.”

His voice was sweet, more like throwing a charm towards someone he liked rather than talking to a subordinate. Any ordinary person would have blushed at such words, but Yuder, on the contrary, became calmer.

“I’m already your subordinate, Captain. You’ve been more than generous with me. I’m not sure what you mean by getting closer here, but…”

“Oh? So, you’re going to dodge it this time?”

Kishiar grinned, pulling up the corners of his mouth.

“Well, fine. I’m the type who feels more accomplished when I break down a higher wall.”

A high wall. It was not an expression that someone of imperial lineage would use to a commoner.

“Just as I said, you’re already my subordinate, so let’s take a long-term view.”

That was a declaration that he wouldn’t give up on his intention. As Yuder’s eyes twitched, Kishiar stood up from his seat. It seemed he was about to set off again.

“Yuder Aile. If you notice any strange circumstances in the future, feel free to report them to me anytime. If I’m not around and you meet my deputy or other people, feel free to talk to them as you would to me. I’ll let them know.”

“…Understood.”

For a single conversation, it was a remarkable achievement. It was also a gesture that proved Kishiar had a significant interest in

Yuder’s mind and abilities.

‘He’s certainly no ordinary man.’

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Chapter 33

‘He’s certainly not an ordinary human.’

And Yuder, too, marveled anew at Kishiar’s abilities during their brief conversation.

Swift action and decisiveness upon identifying the necessary skills. A privilege that seemed trivial but was likely the result of foresight into the future of the Cavalry. An unpretentious attitude, disregarding status. A mind capable of sincerely and unbiasedly receiving and considering others’ words.

Having held the same position as Commander of the Cavalry, Yuder felt Kishiar’s capabilities even more vividly.

During his time as commander, Yuder had met many kings and nobles, including the Emperor of the Orr Empire, and respected abilities within and outside the country.

It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that he had met almost all the high-ranking individuals of the continent. However, possessing power and status did not necessarily mean one also had wisdom.

Those with power and status were suspicious of others. The more one had, the more human nature dictated the need to be wary of one’s surroundings. Those who deviated from this norm were either uninterested in worldly affairs or displayed an indifferent attitude toward everything.

Yet, Kishiar didn’t fit into either category.

‘I think it was the same back then. I was often surprised because he was different from the image of the imperial family that I vaguely imagined.’

“…”

Suddenly, he felt a bitter taste in his mouth. He had recalled the reason why Kishiar had died so quickly.

“Alright, let’s get moving again.”

Before Yuder’s thoughts could wander further, Kishiar announced the end of their break. The scattered members regrouped and reformed their ranks. Gakane, who had gone to drink water, also returned to Yuder’s side.

“Yuder. What did you talk about with the commander?”

There was a look of disbelief in Gakane’s eyes.

“We didn’t talk about much.”

“Even so…… It seems like you’re not having any difficulty with him at all.”

“I haven’t done anything wrong, so why would it be difficult?”

“Well, I guess that’s true.”

Gakane sighed quietly, gazing at Kishiar’s strong back as he walked ahead.

“I always feel scared when I stand before him. I must be a coward.”

His last words were a whisper barely audible, but Yuder heard them clearly.

‘Coward? Gakane Bolunwald, the social butterfly?’

Yuder found it laughable, almost as if a passing dog had spoken, but Gakane seemed to be quite sincere.

Gakane Bolunwald was tall and well-built, even among the 330 Cavalry members. He came from a reputable family, was cheerful, and had a dazzling appearance. He was even an Alpha, according to what he heard yesterday.

With such promising future prospects, it was hard to believe he was a coward. It felt as if he was being too modest.

‘I didn’t think he had a self-deprecating personality.’

But that wasn’t a big problem. The Cavalry was only going to thrive from now on. Once Gakane adapted to that, he would change.

Reminiscing about how Gakane had actively represented the Cavalry, being pulled into all sorts of tasks from Yuder’s past memories, he looked away from Gakane’s worried expression.

Right now, something more important came to his mind after hearing that Gakane was an Alpha.

‘Come to think of it, I haven’t told Kishiar about the matter regarding the second gender manifestation.’

Even so, he was not worried because of what Kishiar had said earlier. He had said that it was okay to come and talk comfortably in the future, so he thought he could pass on the information whenever he had the time.

—

As they approached the place with the Red Stone, the mountain forest grew increasingly quiet. At first, they had felt no signs of beasts or birds, but now even the sounds of insects had ceased.

Around this time, the first signs of physical distress appeared. It was one of the Knights of Peletta.

“Guh… Hah…!”

“Lug!”

As one knight staggered and knelt, another knight who had been beside him called out his name in haste and supported him. Everyone stopped and turned to look at him. The fallen knight’s face was terribly pale, and sweat poured from his forehead like rain.

“What happened?”

“S-sorry, Your Grace. Suddenly, it feels like something is pressing down on my head…”

When Kishiar approached and asked, the knight tried to force himself to stand. However, just as he said, it seemed as if something really was pressing him down, and he collapsed again. His face became even paler.

“Urgh…”

“Don’t try to move forcefully.”

Kishiar, who had reached out to prevent the knight from moving, turned his head and looked at General Gino. The general was calmly examining the knight.

“It begins now. They held on longer than my men, but we’ll start to see dropouts soon.”

“Do they all react as if they’re feeling physical pressure?”

“Yes, it’s similar. But it seems that knight endured too much.”

“Didn’t I tell them to step back as soon as it gets tough?”

At Kishiar’s words, the knight’s expression darkened.

“I apologize. But thinking I might be the first one to fall behind…”

The knight’s gaze moved sequentially to Kishiar and General Gino, both with unblemished faces, and then to the horsemen beside them. Yuder thought his pointless stubbornness was foolish.

“General. You said it gets better as the distance increases, right?”

“Yes. It heals as if it were a lie.”

“He doesn’t seem capable of going down on his own. Someone has to help.”

As Kishiar carefully surveyed the surroundings, his gaze halted at the Eldore siblings.

“Hinn Eldore, Finn Eldore.”

“Yes.”

“The ability you said could only be used when you’re together, can you use it now?”

The siblings, who looked identical as if they were reflections in a mirror, looked at each other. The knights looked puzzled, but the Cavalry, who knew why the siblings had joined the journey, remained calm.

“It should be possible if it’s near the place where we rested by the spring earlier.”

Hinn estimated the distance and asked her younger sibling, Finn, who responded with a nod.

“Good. Try it right away.”

“Understood.”

As the Eldore siblings approached the fallen knight, the knight seemed a little frightened.

“W-what ability is this? I can go back by myself. There’s really no need to…”

“Don’t worry. It’s nothing. How can you say you can go back by yourself when you can’t even stand?”

“We’ll send you back to the spring where we were earlier in no time, rest there a bit and then go back.”

The siblings easily quelled the knight’s defiance with a single sentence and stood facing each other, enclosing him between them.

“I’ve heard about their development of movement abilities during their training, but it’s the first time I’m seeing them use it in person. Do you think it’ll work?” Kanna, who had moved closer to Yuder, murmured in a small voice, her expression filled with concern. However, Yuder wasn’t particularly worried.

‘There may be various restrictions when casting, but it should not be a problem in a situation like this. We’re not in the middle of combat, and we’re not pressed for time.’

The Eldore siblings had the ability to teleport entities or objects between them to any ground they both had previously set foot on.

However, the ability had its limitations. The teleportation distance was short, the casting took considerable time, and they couldn’t use it while in transit, which made it not the most practical of abilities.

‘So, their tasks mainly involved being deployed to places requiring combat power. The teleportation ability was used when they needed to relay tactical orders to the following forces. That would have been enough.’

Yuder had never undertaken a mission with them before. Although he had sent them on a few assignments since becoming the leader, he had hardly interacted with them personally, so the current situation felt quite novel.

‘Well, let’s see how well they do.’

Kishiar, too, seemingly shared his sentiment as he watched the siblings holding hands around the knight, his arms crossed casually. As Hinn and Finn closed their eyes to concentrate, the knight looked up at them with growing fear.

“Your Grace. Deputy Commander. I’ll descend on my own. I’m truly sorry for being stubborn out of embarrassment. But this…!”

“Quiet. It’s almost done, let’s go!”

As Finn, who had just opened his eyes, shouted, a whirlwind of blue energy erupted from the hand they held together. As the energy enveloped the knight, a slight gust of wind blew, and the knight gasped as if he was about to faint.

“What is this? Wait. Just wait a moment…!”

But he couldn’t finish his sentence, for the moment the blue whirlwind completely enveloped him, he vanished. When he disappeared, the wind subsided, and the blue energy that had been rippling was absorbed back between the hands of the siblings as if it was being sucked in.

“It’s like the teleportation magic that was said to be used in ancient times.”

General Gino, who had watched the scene, quietly made his comment. Seeing him show interest for the first time, having been composed all this while, a sense of pride spread across the faces of the Eldore siblings.

“I was wondering why such young-looking kids were brought along. Was it for this purpose?”

“I can’t say that’s the only reason, but you could say that. Their true abilities are more geared towards offense.”

General Gino’s gaze swept over the Cavalry members.

“I’m curious about the abilities the others possess, given Your Majesty’s statement.”

“Even at your age, your competitive spirit remains.”

“Do I appear so? Rather than wanting to compete, it’s merely curiosity.”

At Kishiar’s words, General Gino gave a faint smile.

“Well, you may deny it, but I see it all.”

After saying that, Kishiar told the others that they would now resume their journey.

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“Do not exhaust yourselves like the one who just left. If you notice any symptoms, no matter how minor, speak up immediately. If anyone appears unable to walk on their own, Hinn Eldore and Finn Eldore will assist them as before.”

“Understood.”

The gaze of the remaining four members of the Peletta Knights hardened. They too must have been reluctant to be swept away by the mysterious blue wind to an unknown location.

Not long after, two of the Peletta Knights raised their hands, confessing they couldn’t bear the pressure any longer, and descended.

As the surrounding scenery gradually turned barren, with lush trees and grasses disappearing and only rocks beginning to surface, another one retreated.

What remained were a single Peletta Knight, five Cavalry members, Commander Kishiar and General Gino. Compared to the Cavalry members, who showed no signs of fatigue, the lone Peletta knight’s breath was growing ragged, seemingly struggling.

Yuder identified him as the knight who had led the way here, the one the other knights had called ‘deputy-commander.’ He seemed to be the highest-ranking of the Peletta Knights who had come this time.

‘He seems to be the most capable among them, too.’

It was believable that Swordmaster General Gino and Commander Kishiar were unaffected, but was it really coincidence

that all five Cavalry members seemed fine? Yuder had kept a close eye on the energy flowing around him as he ascended. However, so far, he hadn't noticed anything unusual.

"Gakane, how are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. If anything, I feel a bit more energetic as we get closer to where the stone is… I've been wondering if the stone that awakened us might be the reason."

Gakane, after hearing the question, examined his own arms and legs before responding. Yuder thought his theory might have some merit.

"We're almost there. If we climb up there, we will be able to see the massive crater created by the falling stone at once."

As the trees began to disappear and they finally arrived at a slope primarily composed of rocks, General Gino addressed Kishiar.

"Right, that place, called the Navel of the World or something equally grandiose. I'm quite eager to see what it looks like."

The Navel of the World. Listening to their conversation, Yuder sifted through the information he remembered from the past.

The Yuder of the past had not participated in the Red Stone retrieval operation, but before his death, he had read a brief piece of information about the massive crater created by the falling stone while researching the Red Stone.

One day, the Red Stone fell from the sky, landing in the middle of the Airic Mountains, instantly destroying all surrounding trees and land and creating a massive crater. It was said that the size of the crater was so large that nearly a whole city's worth of forest disappeared. Even after the stone was retrieved, no trees or grass grew there.

Finally, the party stood at the end of the slope. And before their eyes lay a breathtaking sight—an endless, gigantic chasm.

It was as if someone had scooped out a part of the mountain with a colossal spoon. The enormous crater wasn't just a crater—it was more akin to a valley or a rift.

"I have a feeling the air is different from here on out. It gives me the chills."

Gakane crinkled his nose, peering down into the abyss. His statement was not just a figment of his imagination. Yuder also felt a similar sensation, looking at the dizzyingly vast pit.

'Yes, this is the feeling.'

Long ago, when he saw the Red Stone that Kishiar had retrieved from a distance, he felt a strange energy. It was as if the invisible air from all around was pressing down on him, a faint pressure that seemed to ride on the wind.

"What a refreshing sight. Let's proceed downward now."

Kishiar looked around with a unique appreciation. There didn't seem to be any safe paths, but they had to descend. The Red Stone they were seeking lay right in the middle of that immense pit.

"Your Highness, I… I think I should not proceed any further."

The last remaining Peletta Knight spoke to Kishiar, who was about to descend a suitable slope.

"I'm having difficulty breathing."

"Alright, understood. Stay here, a little further away."

"I apologize. I should follow you until the end… I am ashamed."

“You’ve done an excellent job just by following us this far. Don’t worry about it.”

Finally, the last remaining knight withdrew as well. Tension appeared on the faces of the Cavalry members.

They carefully stepped down, ensuring they did not slip. As they descended, the pressure became stronger, until it felt as if thousands of needles were prickling their entire bodies by the time they reached the bottom.

‘It seems that all the Cavalry members are in a similar state… Is it because we are Awakeners?’

Yuder scanned the faces of the slowly moving members. Although they felt the pressure, none of them seemed to be having trouble breathing.

“General, which way should we go now?”

“Head straight towards the center of the pit. The stone is very small, so you can only see it when you get close.”

Kishiar questioned, and General Gino answered. Even he seemed to feel a significant pressure now, as his brows were furrowed.

Only Kishiar and Yuder did not show any changes in their expressions.

‘The World Sphere didn’t emit such strong energy.’

As Yuder approached the location of the Red Stone, he recalled the World Sphere he had seen countless times.

The World Sphere, long kept embedded in the Sanctuary Forest, did give off a slightly strange sensation when approached, but it did

not emit such rough and intense energy.

‘It’s clear that the energy of the Red Stone was reduced and disappeared due to the refining process in the Pearl Tower. What the hell were they trying to do?’

The mages of the Pearl Tower, who had refined the Red Stone into the World Sphere, Yuder did not know what their purpose was, but he thought it probably wasn’t a good one.

‘They did more than one or two pieces of trashy research there.’

Originally, the Pearl Tower was a place created by the Archmage Pierre Mice, who wanted to lead mages who did not want to be influenced by any political purpose and solely desired to practice magic.

Like a clam that coats a foreign substance with hundreds, thousands of layers of nacre to create a single pearl, they were obsessed with magic and lived only for magic, layering countless magics to achieve the essence. They named it the Pearl Tower, symbolizing their aspiration to pile up countless magic to form the essence.

At first, they were indeed ostracized, but as time passed, the situation changed. The Pearl Tower produced numerous archmages and released several outstanding research findings.

Until recently, when people thought of mages, the image of court mages working exclusively for the state was strong. But the mages of the Pearl Tower didn’t work for anyone. They researched and trained freely.

Those bound by the state, moving for the elite, couldn’t compare with those who trained freely. After a few centuries, all the countries could no longer ignore the Pearl Tower, and it grew into an organization representing all mages.

The problem was that over time, their original good intentions gradually twisted into something strange.

The goal of existing solely for magic was gone. The current Pearl Tower clung to the power structures of various nations, using their power for them and consistently conducting inhumane research.

The creation of the Misty Wind Horse was one of the less inhumane experiments they conducted. At least it was a product of research using captured monsters and beasts.

The mages of the Pearl Tower struggled to the bitter end to not lose the power they obtained through the Awakeners' Red Stone. Yuder strongly suspected that their efforts to refine the Red Stone into a World Sphere were part of that struggle.

'Good riddance. Even if I didn't do it.'

Yuder chuckled as he recalled the destruction of the Pearl Tower, one of the charges that led to his execution.

"The stone is in sight."

At that moment, General Gino spoke heavily. Yuder's gaze, lost in the past, followed his. Half-buried in the ground where General Gino was looking was a stone the size of a fist.

The stone looked completely ordinary. If it wasn't the only stone in this desolate place, no one would have thought it was the Red Stone.

It was a slightly gloomy color, rough but generally round in shape.

Even though they were still quite far away, the stone was very clearly visible because there was nothing around it. The party all stopped, each absorbed in their own emotions. Some showed reverence, some fear, and some simple curiosity.

Yuder also felt a very strange feeling the moment he saw the stone. But what he felt was far from the reverence or fear of the others.

‘Because of that.’

Because of that, his fate had changed.

Yuder, once an ordinary peasant boy, had become an Awakener, possessing the greatest power in the world, and was eventually executed for the crime of trying to touch that stone. His life and death had essentially been determined by that stone.

‘And now it’s a stone that needs to be carefully observed and protected.’

Previously, he had not been able to closely examine the stone before it was chipped away. But this time was different. Yuder resolved to use this opportunity he’d been given more wisely than anyone else.

“How’s everyone feeling?”

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Chapter 35

“How is everyone holding up?”

Kishiar, who had halted his steps to scrutinize the stone, turned to the others as though he had made some kind of assessment.

“We previously stopped a little further from here. Roughly, that’s the limit we can endure while the gods protect our bodies.”

General Gino answered first. He appeared calm on the surface, but as he drew closer to the stone, his movements gradually slowed. This signified that he was experiencing a pressure strong enough to restrict the movements of a Swordmaster.

“I, well, my skin hurts a bit, but I think I can go a bit further.”

“Same here. It feels like something is pricking my face, but I can endure it.”

“I’m in the same boat.”

After Kanna’s response, Hinn and Gakane also chimed in. Since Hinn would obviously share the same opinion as her brother, the only one left was Yuder.

“Me too.”

“I’m the same as you lot. It’s rather unpleasant but bearable. If all five of us are experiencing the same thing, it’s likely due to us being Awakeners.”

Kishiar grinned, seemingly amused. Before moving forward, he glanced towards the Red Stone and then gave a brief order to General Gino.

“General, there’s no need for you to follow us to the limit. Just stay there. The Cavalry and I will be back.”

“…Understood.”

They began to move cautiously. Now, the stone was so close that they could touch it if they fell.

As they got closer to the stone, the prickling pressure on their skin increased, and every step became incomparably heavier. It was like forcefully traversing the depths of a turbulent sea.

However, it was not so painful that they’d collapse, spilling blood. It was surprisingly bearable, to a startling degree.

“Everyone, halt.”

Finally, when Kishiar declared it was okay not to proceed any further, they were only about ten steps away from the stone.

‘That’s the Red Stone.’

He hadn’t expected to see it this close, in this way. Yuder quietly gazed down at the half-buried Red Stone and took a deep breath.

‘It’s just a stone… But let’s not let our guards down.’

“It looks surprisingly ordinary.”

Kishiar, while looking at the red stone, verbalized what everyone was thinking.

“Now then… Kanna Wand.”

“Yes? Uh, yes.”

Kanna, startled by her name being called out of the blue, responded. Kishiar gave her a gentle smile.

“Do you think you can read that stone using your ability?”

At Kishiar’s words, the same thought occurred to everyone, except Yuder.

‘So that’s why she was brought along.’

The others possessed abilities useful in combat, but not Kanna. If the reason she was chosen was to read the information from the Red Stone, it made sense. It might be impossible, but if possible, they might learn something truly astonishing.

‘That’s right. There was hardly any known information about the Red Stone even before.’

Yuder had suspected that Kishiar might ask this of Kanna ever since he chose her. Even if he had been the leader, he would have certainly tried if there had been someone with Kanna’s ability.

From the very beginning, the reason Yuder had insisted on Kanna’s successful admission into the Cavalry was precisely in anticipation of situations like this.

‘Back then, I was desperately lacking information. In all respects.’

By the time the past Yuder had realized something was off, it was already too late. The people and the information that had vanished with the passage of time couldn’t be retrieved, no matter what he did.

However, with Kanna, the story was different. Of course, provided that she could touch and read it.

“I’m not sure. If I can touch it… I think I could at least try. But whether I’ll be successful…”

Kanna’s ability required her to physically touch the object to read its information. Could she really touch that stone, which radiated

such a tremendous pressure that it stung the skin even from a distance, for an extended period of time? Could she guarantee she wouldn't get hurt? It was something no one could tell.

And as if he had been waiting for her to say that, Kishiar's red eyes turned towards Gakane.

"You're right. So, you might need some help. Gakane Volunbolt?"

"Yes!"

Gakane responded loudly, his face startled.

"Use your shadow to touch the stone first."

'…Indeed. I hadn't thought of that.'

Yuder sincerely admired it. Gakane's ability was to summon shadows, primarily used for communication or to aid in combat.

But to use it to first touch something as dangerous as the Red Stone… That was an inventive yet promising directive.

Gakane, seemingly not expecting such an order, had an astonished look on his face. However, he soon used his ability without a word.

The black shadow at his feet squirmed and distorted, then rose up and took on a black, doll-like form that mirrored Gakane's.

'This is the first time I'm seeing it properly, even though he rarely uses it in practice.'

Despite its apparent usefulness in daily life, Gakane rarely used this ability. When asked why, he said it was because the ability could become a sharp or a blunt knife depending on the user's capacity.

'Such sound judgment indeed.'

Gakane’s shadow clone moved according to Gakane’s will. That meant it couldn’t exert more power than the main body was capable of.

Would a sword wielded by a commoner and a swordmaster exhibit the same power? Of course not. A sword swung by a competent person could obliterate mountains and divide seas.

Gakane’s ability was similar. The higher the combat sense and skill of the main body, the brighter his ability shone. Recognizing this early and striving to enhance his own ability first, Gakane was already exemplary. There was a reason he shouldn’t die young.

“I’ll give it a try.”

After giving a terse response, Gakane directed his shadow clone, which cautiously began to walk towards the Red Stone. It didn’t take many steps for the clone to reach the stone. It slowly knelt down and extended its hand.

The shadow clone had effortlessly approached the stone that even the Swordmaster couldn’t touch. Everyone held their breath as the shadow’s fingertips were about to make contact with the stone.

Sizzle!

“Ah!”

However, when the hand touched the stone, a blindingly white light burst forth.

For the first time in his life, Yuder felt a strange energy trying to pierce his body. He quickly exerted his power, creating a barrier of water and air around everyone.

A fierce gust of wind blew, and gasps of surprise echoed around, but there was no time to react.

The energy, an enormous energy that felt as if it could engulf the entire world, was spreading out radially!

‘This is……!’

Maintaining the barrier was challenging, but it was better than nothing.

Yuder gritted his teeth, closed his eyes, and maintained his strength. He felt as if the energy moving around him and the new energy emanating from the stone were interlocking, pushing and trying to erode each other.

Despite his efforts to block the external energy, maintaining multiple barriers while focusing was a difficult task.

How long did he keep that up?

After a while, the pressure he felt through his skin suddenly decreased. Only then did Yuder withdraw the barrier and turn his gaze forward.

Gakane’s shadow clone was still sitting in its place. However, starting from the hand that had tried to touch the red stone, half of its upper body seemed to have exploded, leaving it in a ragged state.

‘Did the shadow clone explode?’

If the one there had been a real person, if it had been Kanna, what would have happened?

No, what would have been the outcome if the invisible force he had desperately blocked just now had pierced his body?

A horrifying imagination suddenly dried his lips. Yuder, seeing everyone with similar expressions, turned his gaze to Gakane.

“Gakane. Are you okay?”

“…I think, I’m okay.”

Gakane’s face was pale, but he didn’t seem to have suffered from the damage his shadow had taken. With a slight wave of his hand, the half-disappeared shadow returned to the ground and came back to his side.

“… It’s a good thing we tried touching it first. We almost had a person injured. But what was that barrier that blocked the front just now?”

Kishiar, who seemed to have seen the barrier even amid the bright light, turned his gaze towards Yuder. There was no point in hiding it if he already suspected who had done it.

“I did it. I thought it would be better than nothing.”

“Wasn’t your ability to apply attributes to weapons only?”

“… It’s a utilization method I’ve recently realized. I haven’t used it properly yet, but I exerted my strength desperately as it felt dangerous.”

“What? Did Yuder do something?”

Yuder’s answer was a bit forced, but it wasn’t nonsensical. Indeed, there had been many instances in the past when he suddenly realized a new way to use his abilities.

‘It was a good idea to think ahead in case something like this happened.’

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Chapter 36

The party members were perplexed, unable to see Yuder's protective barrier, but only Kishiar widened his eyes slightly and smiled.

"Interesting… Marvelous, indeed. In that brief moment, it wasn't just self-preservation but the will to exercise your power for everyone else."

"No, it wasn't like that."

Yuder lowered his head, but Kishiar's gaze lingered on his face for a while.

"Just by touching the stone, such an event unfolds. Moving it might not be as easy as we thought."

"…"

Everyone's expression darkened. Yuder was equally perturbed.

'Has this happened before? How did they transport it then?'

Before, Kishiar had retrieved the Red Stone and returned to the Cavalry with it in his hand. Since he had taken it directly to the palace, it wasn't that he couldn't move it. What had changed between then and now?

While Yuder pondered, Kishiar issued a new command to the Eldore siblings.

"Is it possible to move it by placing the stone between you? Even a short distance would do. It would be great if you could try."

“Um… We’ll try.”

However, the attempt was doomed before it even began in earnest. As soon as the siblings, who had struggled to position themselves on either side of the red stone, reached out to touch it, energy surged from the stone once again.

“It’s clear that it reacts to something, even without direct contact.”

In the end, Kishiar decided it was unnecessary to attempt any further and suggested they head back.

The group retraced their steps. Throughout the journey, the party members were silent, their expressions grave.

“You’ve worked hard today. I didn’t expect everything to go smoothly from the start. Let’s rest for now and regroup tomorrow. If anyone has something to say about what we’ve seen today, feel free to find me, no matter how late.”

As he spoke, Kishiar’s gaze subtly shifted towards Yuder. Yuder, feeling the weight of that look, pretended not to notice.

‘I can’t possibly know all the answers.’

Although he had memories of the future, he couldn’t know now what he didn’t know then.

Back in his quarters, Yuder lay on his bed, quietly pondering the day’s events.

The strange power emitted by the Red Stone, the reason only the Cavalry members could approach it, the reasons for its explosive behavior, the differences between the past and the present…

Numerous memories swirled in his head, rapidly comparing and analyzing.

‘The biggest problem at the moment is that we can’t move the stone.’

In the past, Kishiar had quickly retrieved the stone and returned. There was a minor incident that revealed him as the owner of the divine sword, but that happened after the stone was retrieved.

In other words, it was correct to think that the retrieval operation itself had been completed quickly without major delay.

Then and now. What has changed?

Of course, the party members chosen by Kishiar were all different. But that alone shouldn’t have made a big difference…

Deep in thought, Yuder’s expression suddenly changed.

‘Come to think of it, when Kishiar brought the Red Stone in the past, he wasn’t holding it directly in his hand.’

The first time he saw Kishiar with the Red Stone, it had been tightly wrapped in a thick cloth to prevent it from being seen. The second and final time he saw it, it was encased in a box carved out of a transparent magic stone.

He had never touched it directly.

Could it have been the answer? It was an unknown, but it seemed worth trying.

Yuder pondered for a moment before rising from his seat.

“Where are you going?”

Gakane, who had been lying on the adjacent bed immersed in thought like Yuder, looked up in surprise.

“Just need to clear my head a bit.”

Yuder quickly left the lodging, fearing Gakane might offer to accompany him. After sunset, the surroundings were dark and quiet.

Once he confirmed that no one was around, Yuder looked at a stone near him. Although it was small, he decided to consider it a substitute for the red stone.

‘And… wrap it.’

The force extending from Yuder’s fingertips moved the earth beneath the stone. Sand slithered up, wrapping around the stone and starting to form a round sphere.

When he felt it was the right size, Yuder wrapped the stone in soil, then called forth water by waving his hand in the air. The water flew towards the lump of earth, wrapping it before freezing into a shiny white shell.

Yuder’s ability allowed him to freely manipulate the elements of nature. Not only could he change the forms, but he could also control temperature. He picked up the large ice sphere, feeling its weight.

‘So easy with a regular stone.’

Would the same method work with the Red Stone? It might be prudent to bring along a thick cloth as well. Yuder decided to pack one in his bag tomorrow.

He dropped the ice sphere, and with another wave of his hand, the solid ice and earth broke and melted, seeping back into nature until they disappeared. All that was left was the original pebble.

As he looked at it, Yuder wondered why Kishiar had needed to wrap the red stone so tightly.

‘The most likely reason is to shield even the slightest bit of the energy it emits.’

The energy emanating from the stone was powerful. Just looking at the shattered shadow of Gakane, who had been hit directly by it, made it clear. Even with a protective barrier, the invisible force tried to penetrate into his body, making him feel breathless to this day.

‘And all that power came from a single small stone.’

Yuder slowly looked down at his palm. He hadn’t noticed until he came down the mountain, but after returning to the lodge and taking a closer look, there was a bruise on the back of his hand, as if something had pierced it.

He couldn’t tell when he got the bruise that looked as if something had exploded from within, but as he looked at it, he remembered.

‘Just before I put up the barrier, some of the force from the stone passed through my hand.’

Something invisible had brushed through his body. It was a subtle but strange sensation. If this mark was indeed caused by that force, then putting up the barrier at that moment seemed to have been the right decision.

‘If that power had pierced my head, heart, or mana hole… I don’t even want to think about it.’

The damage was fortunately limited to his palm. The body of an Awakener was much more resilient than that of a normal person, but it wasn’t invincible.

In particular, the mana hole, located below the navel, was an extremely important organ. Although it didn’t make its presence known regularly, if it were to be destroyed, one would neither be able to use abilities nor detect energy. As Yuder looked down at the area around his lower abdomen, he thought about this organ that was to be revealed to the world in about a year’s time.

At a glance, the bodies of the Awakener didn't seem to have changed much since their awakening. However, in reality, their bodies underwent many transformations. Were these changes really the natural ones prepared by God, as announced by the Pope and the Emperor?

He had known well before his death that their words were not all trustworthy, but since he didn't consider this to be of significant importance, he had never thought deeply about it.

However, having seen the original form of the Red Stone up close and personal, it seemed extraordinarily strange that the energy emitted by this tiny stone changed the bodies of countless people, including himself, and gave them new abilities.

Yuder kicked the stone he had been looking at with the tip of his foot. The rolling stone came to a halt against someone's foot. Surprisingly, Kishiar La Orr was standing there.

"What brings you here?"

"I was just taking a night stroll. What about you?"

"Me too…the same."

He actually had come out to sort out his thoughts on the Red Stone, but he fumbled a vague response. It was quite something to run into Kishiar in such a place again.

Yuder intended to return to his quarters immediately, but Kishiar was a step quicker in striking up a conversation.

"Since we've met, shall we walk together for a bit?"

How could a mere member refuse the commander's request? Yuder sighed softly and nodded his head.

Though Kishiar had invited him for a stroll, he remained silent for a while. Because of this, Yuder felt a strange pressure to start the conversation.

"…Sir…"

"You are…"

In a coincidence, the words they had decided to speak overlapped. Yuder widened his eyes slightly, looking up at Kishiar who was gazing down at him, and lightly bit his lip.

"Please, you first."

"No, it wasn't important. You first."

"No, I was not going to say anything important either."

There was nothing particularly friendly to be shared between him and Kishiar. His plan was to bring up today's events first and if there was nothing more to say, throw out a topic related to the second gender. As Yuder shook his head, Kishiar narrowed his eyes.

"Is that so? If it's not important, there's no harm in you going first. Even if I order you to speak first as your leader, you wouldn't like it?"

'This crafty…'

Yuder's eyebrows twitched.

His past of using the invincible excuse of 'orders from the leader' to make his subordinates do similar tasks momentarily disappeared from his mind.

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Kishiar chuckled at the sight of Yuder's grimaced expression. He found it amusing that a commoner, neither royal nor noble, could hardly disguise his displeasure over such a trivial matter.

"Understood… I was wondering what you would do if we couldn't find a way to retrieve the Red Stone as it is. Did I get it right?"

"A way to retrieve it, huh?"

Kishiar was not at all bothered by Yuder's slightly prickly tone.

"Were you worrying about that?"

Well, it was his first mission, so it must have been worrisome. Kishiar surmised Yuder's concerns and met his gaze, his red eyes shifting slightly.

"Ever since before I came here, no, from the day I received the report that the stone had fallen from the sky, I've been receiving updates on the state of the Red Stone. No one else had come as close as we did, but that didn't mean others did nothing against the stone. Today, we simply intended to observe."

"So, are you saying that you're confident about retrieving it tomorrow?"

How? Yuder's black eyes, not hiding his doubt, gleamed quietly in the darkness. Instead of answering directly, Kishiar smiled.

"Curious, are you?"

"Of course, I am."

“What about accepting the position of deputy to the Shin Division?”

“I refuse.”

“You said you wanted to know?”

“I would know when I wake up tomorrow anyway, so there’s no need to accept that just to find out a few hours earlier.”

It was a wise answer.

“While others would have readily accepted the offer for a higher position, you are quite obstinate. Why do you refuse?”

“As I’ve said before, I’m not fit for such a position.”

His voice sounded cold, even to his own ears. But even if Kishiar found it strange, Yuder had no intention of accepting the deputy’s position.

A member with commoner background could never become the commander directly, even if the commander died. But a deputy could succeed to the commander’s position. So, it was impossible. Yuder was resolved never to become a commander again, as he had been before.

Reading his firm resolve, Kishiar let out a long sigh.

“If we go tomorrow and try a few more methods, and if they still don’t work, I plan to dig up the land around the stone in its entirety and put it in a box. It might be safe as long as we don’t touch it directly.”

A method of physical isolation and movement. It was the same conclusion Yuder had come to.

“I thought you’d find it ridiculous, but you seem surprisingly calm.”

“It’s not ridiculous. On the contrary, I might be able to help with my ability if we go with that method.”

“That’s reassuring.”

Kishiar let out a low laugh.

“I’m counting on you for tomorrow.”

“…”

One topic had ended. Now it was Kishiar’s turn to speak. Facing Yuder’s silent gaze, Kishiar paused for a moment before opening his mouth.

“About what you told me during the day.”

There was only one thing Yuder could have said to him during the day. It was the story related to the information that there were unusually many awakeners among the regular soldiers of the Southern Army guarding the red stone.

‘Could he have already figured that out?’

“It turns out it was true.”

Kishiar immediately confirmed Yuder’s speculation as true.

“And despite knowing, I never considered it important… knowing yet ignoring…”

His smile wasn’t his usual leisurely one, but one that exuded incredulity, hinting at his feelings.

“Gosh, what a close shave. If I had gone back and forth without any knowledge…”

What would have happened? He would have been blindsided by the news of the special force's establishment years later.

Unable to voice his thoughts, Yuder closed his mouth. Kishiar would have had the same prediction anyway.

"Your insight and judgment might be the abilities most needed by the current Cavalry and me. But no matter how good my proposition is, you keep refusing… What should I do with you?"

It seemed like a big dilemma. Although it sounded like a mumble, there was truth embedded in his words.

"What is there for you to do? If you need my abilities, I can be of help here."

"But you refuse to get closer, you don't want the deputy commander's position, you keep putting up walls… how far can I trust you?"

"…"

His argument was not groundless. From the perspective of the commander who had to lead a newly formed Cavalry, Yuder's refusal could be seen as untrustworthy.

Yuder pondered over how to convince him. However, his serious contemplation shattered with Kishiar's next words.

"Well then, shall we spend the night together? I'm confident in that aspect. I can make you forget about time."

Yuder doubted his ears for a moment.

'What did he just say?'

"I think… I misheard something."

“It seems like you heard it right.”

“Spend the night together? What do you mean?”

“Literally. Status and walls become meaningless in bed. It’s a good way to improve our relationship. Or… perhaps you’ve never spent the night with someone at your age?”

That was surprising. Kishiar looked Yuder up and down. It was an act that, had the other person been anyone but Kishiar La Orr, could have provoked a physical response.

Barely suppressing his urge, Yuder gritted his teeth. His head was spinning.

‘Kishiar La Orr. What on earth…’

Yuder’s shock wasn’t merely because his superior, of noble standing, proposed a deeply personal relationship for a trivial reason.

‘…I can’t believe I’m hearing this kind of proposition again in my life.’

A fragment of a past conversation fluttered up in Yuder’s eyes:

…Now that things have come to this, what can we do? I value your abilities and have no intention of discarding them. Isn’t it okay if we just share the night when needed?……

‘Damn!’

With the curse swallowed back into his mouth, the memory from the past dissipated.

He thought he would never hear those words again. Wasn’t that why he had built up walls?

But Kishiar, whom he had met again after a long time since he had killed him with his own hands, never acted as Yuder had anticipated.

Yuder looked at the handsome face of the nobleman of Imperial lineage, who was seriously proposing a relationship of sharing nights with a man from humble origins.

It wasn't good.

Perhaps the present situation was even worse than before. At least in the past, there had been an unavoidable circumstance that had changed their relationship. But that wasn't the case now.

His goal had simply been to become a subordinate close enough to give simple advice. Where on earth had he gone wrong?

'No, it's not over yet. It's not too late. What he just said was merely a probe.'

With a deep breath, Yuder calmed his shock. It seemed unbelievable that a proposal to share a bed and a proposal to become the deputy commander could be in the same context… but if it was Kishiar, it was possible. He was someone who could do just that.

'Let's just take it as him expressing his interest to that extent.'

"I can't," Yuder flatly refused. It was a rare spectacle for a commoner like Yuder, a mere member of the unit, to outright refuse the most personal proposal from Kishiar La Orr.

"Why? Are you the type who can't accept such a relationship between men? Or are you a devout follower of the Sun God? Or, did you leave a lover back home?"

"Do you think there has to be a reason?"

If Kishiar, a nobleman, a duke, and a commander of the Cavalry, was trying to take a commoner man by leveraging his power and position, it might be understandable. But that wasn't the case.

"Even if it's just once?"

"I refuse."

"Quite firm."

Fortunately, Kishiar did not push further. It meant he had proposed without attributing any significant meaning to physicality.

'But he's clearly aware that others could interpret the proposal as meaningful.'

That made it even more repugnant. No matter how talented and visionary he was, Kishiar La Orr was an enigma. It had always been that way.

"I quite liked your face and body, too bad."

"If you don't want me to voluntarily quit, please stop."

Yuder decided not to beat around the bush any longer. Kishiar chuckled lazily.

"I can't do that. But if you ever change your mind, you can always tell me."

A long sigh escaped involuntarily.

He spoke well for an Alpha drawn only to Omegas.

While it wasn't widely known, Kishiar La Orr was an Alpha. Although they could mate with Betas or other genders, most Alphas felt a distinct desire only for Omegas.

In other words, Kishiar, an Alpha, should not have felt a desire for Yuder, who had not manifested a second gender…

Upon this thought, Yuder decided to shift the topic in that direction.

“Rather than such talk, how about considering potential issues related to second genders that might arise among Awakeners?”

It wasn’t a problem that had clearly emerged yet, so he couldn’t speak definitively. Yuder had intended to speak of a problem that might arise, and barely managed to rephrase it, finding the whole situation challenging.

“Problems related to the second gender?”

Kishiar tilted his head slightly, as if asking if there was such a thing.

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“What are you referring to?”

“I’ve heard that those who manifested second genders periodically emit a scent from their bodies both during and after it manifested.”

Emitting a scent from their bodies. It was a roundabout way of saying they were in heat.

“It hasn’t happened in our Cavalry yet, but wouldn’t accidents occur if they are in close proximity during such periods? As a place where the awakeners gather, I believe it’s an issue you should consider, Commander, for the sake of the future.”

Furthermore, it was absolutely necessary to establish a system quickly for organizations with a particularly high ratio of awakeners, like this Southern Army, and for the sake of the country where more and more awakeners would live together in the future.

‘In the past, laws could only be established after numerous accidents had occurred.’

Two years had passed since the Red Stone fell, and until now, the number of awakeners had not been that great. However, as time went on, the number of awakeners steadily increased, and the types of abilities diversified. Along with this, the number of those who manifested second genders also increased, leading to many accidents due to unavoidable reasons.

A considerable amount of time was needed for people to recognize and familiarize themselves with a new phenomenon and find a way to cope with it. The same went for those who manifested second genders.

The notion that those who manifested a second gender must be separated from people for a while. That one should not carelessly encounter Alphas or Omegas in heat. Even such basic information was unknown to everyone at this point.

Normally, someone would have to suffer for such information to be gradually disseminated, but Yuder didn't like that.

"Accidents caused by the manifestation of second genders… That's a valid point."

"If there are no rules when an incident occurs and requires handling… it will be too late."

It must be designated as early as possible. When the Cavalry was newly formed and everything was still possible, and when there was no one to threaten Kishiar's position.

"Understood. I was in the process of creating internal regulations with the help of jurists anyway, so there will be no problem adding this. I'll take it into consideration."

"Thank you."

"But how did you, a non-manifested, think this far?"

He couldn't reply that it was because he was the one who would manifest as an Omega in the future, so Yuder lied.

"I heard about these things before joining the Cavalry, so I wanted to propose it."

"I see."

No matter how smart Kishiar La Orr was, he couldn't deduce the absurd truth that Yuder had memories of the future. Kishiar easily accepted Yuder's answer.

“We’ve come this far while talking. It’s late, let’s meet tomorrow.”

While they were conversing, they had unknowingly returned to the place where they first met.

Glancing up at the starry sky and estimating the time by the position of the moon, Kishiar turned away even before receiving Yuder’s farewell.

He was refreshingly indifferent, not the type of person who would suggest spending the night together.

Yuder watched silently until his figure completely disappeared into the darkness.

—

The Red Stone fell from the sky one day. Some thought it was a message from God to humans, while others believed it was a stone that flew in from another world. Yuder was neither of these.

“Evidence is clear. Or, I can only believe what I see with my own eyes.” That was his principle.

So, it wasn’t strange that he had a different thought in front of the Red Stone the next day, an anomaly he had witnessed and experienced firsthand.

‘Could it really be an object that came flying from another world?’

“Yuder, what’s wrong?”

Gakane, who stood by Yuder’s side, asked with a concerned look in his eyes.

“Are you affected by the energy the stone is emitting?”

“No.”

He no longer cared about the energy that the Red Stone emitted. Although the air became heavier and his skin tingled as he approached the stone that day, it was considerably less intense than the previous day.

It wasn't only Yuder who had become accustomed; Kanna, who had barely managed to reach this distance yesterday, seemed much calmer today.

'She seemed to blame herself quite a bit for being unable to help yesterday. There was no need to worry.'

Kanna had been gloomy all the way back to their lodgings yesterday. Despite her lack of combat abilities, they had gone to great lengths to bring her here, yet she hadn't been of any help when they needed her most. It was understandable.

But, considering her arm might have disappeared if she had touched the stone, rather than just Gakane's shadow, it was fortunate for the others that she hadn't.

'The issue today isn't the tingling energy… it's the stone itself.'

The reason for Yuder's seriousness was simple: his attempts to move the Red Stone had all failed.

Before coming here today, Yuder had cut out a piece of an extra blanket back at their lodgings and put it into a small bag. His original plan was to apply his power to the stone, forming it into a sphere of dirt and ice as he did yesterday, and then attempt to make contact by covering it with the cloth.

But the moment he faced the Red Stone again, he remembered something he hadn't tried yesterday.

If the Red Stone belonged to the natural world of this realm, it wouldn't reject his touch. The ability to freely manipulate all natural

attributes and the materials born from them was perhaps the most necessary power for transporting the stone.

So, Yuder secretly tried to use his power on the stone itself, not the earth beneath it. But the stone didn’t move a bit.

It was fortunate that he didn’t cause an energy explosion like the Eldore siblings who had tried to use their power on the Red Stone yesterday, but there was no reaction at all.

Yuder’s power couldn’t directly affect things not born in this world, like monsters, for example.

When he tried to use his power against those creatures, known to be born in places where the world’s mana was distorted, nothing happened, just like now.

Of course, it didn’t matter since he could attack indirectly, but it was a problem that he had a weak reaction to things like ropes made from monster tendons or alcohol mixed with monster blood.

In the future that only remained in Yuder’s memory, there was a law prohibiting Awakeners from using their powers around the World Sphere. So, he never thought to try moving something directly in this way, and he regretted it now.

‘Well, knowing that my power doesn’t work doesn’t mean I’ve found a better way to move the stone…’

Still, he was now free to try indirect methods without hesitation.

‘Let’s watch what Kishiar does and then try to help.’

Kishiar had brought a relatively light yet sturdy wooden box and a large shovel to the site today. Of course, the knights had handled the transportation, but now, at the edge of the vast pit, he was the one holding the shovel.

“Well, let’s try digging a bit.”

Kishiar, who had placed the box next to the Red Stone, slowly picked up the shovel and approached.

“Captain, are you sure you want to do this alone?”

“Yes.”

Gakane looked at the large shovel in Kishiar’s hand as if it were a massive weapon. It seemed unthinkable to him to have the highest-ranking among them do such work, but Kishiar was adamant.

‘I am best suited for this task, considering what happened yesterday. It would be absurd if I did nothing while my subordinates worked hard, wouldn’t it?’

Gakane could say nothing against Kishiar, who stood firm with such resolve.

“Yuder, be ready to erect a protective barrier immediately if you sense anything strange, like yesterday.”

“Yes.”

“Then, I’ll start digging.”

Without hesitation, Kishiar plunged the shovel into the ground next to the Red Stone. At that moment, Yuder noticed a shimmering energy from Kishiar’s hand, narrowing his eyes.

‘Is it an enhancement ability?’

The shovel, sinking into the ground with a sound like settling dust, paused for a moment. Kishiar stood still, seemingly scrutinizing the Red Stone for any anomalies. Then, in a single swift motion, he dug up the Red Stone and swept it into the box.

“Ah!”

The Eldore siblings screamed in unison. Kanna also shrunk back, seemingly anticipating something to happen. From Gakane’s feet, his shadow clone swiftly rose.

“…”

And nothing happened in the box.

“It seems we’re in the clear.”

Everyone stared at the box with puzzled expressions. The only ones who remained composed were Kishiar and Yuder.

With a relieved look on his face, Yuder turned to Kishiar, who was handing the shovel to Gakane, and spoke.

“It seems that as long as we don’t touch it directly, we’re safe. That’s fortunate. Shall we fill it with water and freeze it to prevent it from moving around inside?”

“Can you do that?”

“I can also melt it instantly if needed.”

“Hmm… No, I’d like to see that, but not now. The water created by your ability might trigger a reaction from the stone like yesterday.”

Despite being inside a box, the Red Stone was still a red stone. It soon became clear that General Gino, a Swordmaster, and the Peletta knights could not approach the box at a certain distance.

Hence, it was decided that the box containing the Red Stone would be kept in Kishiar’s private quarters.

“Yuder Aile, carry the box and follow me. Everyone else, return to your quarters. After resting tonight, we will depart for the capital

tomorrow. That’s all.”

Yuder complied with Kishiar’s orders and cradled the box containing the Red Stone. While it wasn’t heavy, the energy emanating from the box still made his body feel heavy, and his skin prickled just as before.

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“I was worried yesterday that the retrieval might be difficult, but I congratulate you on your successful completion,” General Gino, who had moved slightly ahead to avoid the energy spewing from the box, said to Kishiar.

Judging by the direction he was walking, he seemed to intend to accompany Kishiar until he reached his quarters.

“Thank you. I’m glad it ended quickly.”

“Thanks to you, our Southern Army will be able to leave this place for the first time in two years.”

“I’m sure you must be happy to regain your freedom after a few months.”

Hearing Kishiar’s casual response, a faint smile appeared on General Gino’s face. He had always seemed so serious that it was surprising to see that even he had grown tired of this place.

“But, it’s strange that the stone threatens to explode if touched by a person, but is fine when placed in an object. How did you guess that?”

“I think it’s not exactly about human touch that makes it explode.”

For a moment, Kishiar’s gaze turned toward the box held by Yuder.

“It’s still a hypothesis, but I think the likely trigger is Awakeners, like me or the Cavalry members I brought. It reacts to direct contact and to the use of abilities.”

“I see. So that’s why you decided to move it with a shovel and a box, which have no connection with the Awakeners.”

While stroking his chin, lost in thought, General Gino asked Kishiar another question after a moment’s pause.

“Then, it’s possible that those of us who have not gained power from the Red Stone, like me, might not cause it to explode if we touched it. What do you think?”

“Maybe. But what does it matter? Ordinary people can touch it but can’t approach it, and the Awakeners can approach but not touch it directly. The best option was to shovel it into the box. Fortunately, it worked.”

“Quite strange.”

General Gino slightly furrowed his brow. He looked at the box containing the Red Stone as if it were a magic bomb ready to explode at the slightest touch.

“General. We will leave early tomorrow morning. As previously discussed, the withdrawal of the Southern Army stationed here should commence once you receive the signal that we have arrived at the capital.”

“Understood.”

“Try to skip the greetings tomorrow as well. It could draw unnecessary attention.”

Upon hearing Kishiar say that he would even skip greetings, General Gino let out a sigh.

“You say we may not see each other again once we part, but you want to leave without even saying goodbye to this old general?”

“Haha. Wasn’t playing dozens of strategy games with you over the past two days for this very moment?”

“Considering we haven’t seen each other in years, it’s only right that you do at least that much.”

Despite not appearing to be significantly older, General Gino’s gaze towards Kishiar was as affectionate as a grandfather looking at his grandson.

Yuder suddenly remembered that the reputedly upright and reticent General Gino had never had children, having devoted his life to the way of the sword.

“We’ve arrived, so let’s go into our quarters.”

Not long after, Kishiar’s quarters, located on the outskirts of the village, came into view. Unlike the other relatively shabby houses, it was a beautiful mansion, properly constructed with bricks.

Yuder was a bit surprised to find such a lodging in this place, but he guessed it was probably a summer villa built by someone in the past.

“Always take care of your health, Your Majesty.”

“I’m always healthy. Aren’t you due for retirement soon, General? Do patrol the border areas moderately and come to Peletta after you retire.”

“You always speak so sweetly.”

General Gino bowed his head with a laugh, said his farewells, and turned to leave. Yuder also bowed his head towards him, but as expected, there was no response to a mere soldier like him. Yuder quietly watched the General’s figure as it quickly receded into the distance.

This time, there was no opportunity for him to have a personal conversation with the General. But he wasn't disappointed. It was enough to know that Kishiar was considering inviting the retired General to his side.

Their relationship seemed deeper than he had expected, so as long as Kishiar was alive, there would undoubtedly be another opportunity to meet in the future.

"Don't feel left out. The General is older than he looks. He still doesn't fully understand the value of the Awakeners."

Thinking Yuder might be upset about the General's indifference, Kishiar quietly initiated the conversation. Yuder didn't immediately understand what he meant, blinked in confusion, then nodded in realization.

"I'm not upset. Rather, if he showed too much interest, it would have been burdensome."

He was sincere. How much attention could someone like General Gino, who had lived high up for a long time, show to a greenhorn like himself who had just joined the cavalry?

In his eyes, the members of the Cavalry were no different from the common soldiers that populated the Southern Army.

They might be interesting because of their unique abilities, but that was about it. There was no reason at all to treat them as equals to someone like Kishiar, whom he had watched since his young prince days.

Yuder never for a moment fooled himself into thinking that his status had elevated simply because he had joined the Cavalry and received a title.

"I like that you're consistent."

Kishiar chuckled and opened the door. The unusually high, arched wooden door was heavy enough to be hard to open even with both hands, but Kishiar easily opened it with one hand.

“Now, let’s go in.”

Kishiar, who had opened the unusually high, arched entrance door with one hand, gestured for them to go inside.

It was a completely different behavior from when he was walking elegantly with General Gino.

“…Where should I put the box?”

“Just put it anywhere nearby. You’ll have to come back and get it tomorrow anyway.”

Normally, the knights of Peletta would have taken care of it, but they couldn’t even approach the box containing the Red Stone. The reason they had decided to follow at a distance from the Cavalry on the way back tomorrow was also due to this.

Yuder set the box down under a pillar’s shadow, where it wasn’t very noticeable inside the entrance. As he moved away from the box, his skin felt significantly less prickly.

“Then, I’ll be heading back.”

“You’ve worked hard carrying it all the way here, it would be quite heartless of me to just let you go. At least have a cup of tea before you leave.”

“No, I’ll be……”

“Don’t tell me you’re planning to heartlessly reject the request of a leader who has spent two whole nights without an adjutant? Even

so, that would be going too far. I believe that Yuder Aile, who deeply cares for his fellow Awakener, wouldn't do such a thing."

…Since when did you know that?…

Before Yuder could reject the idea, Kishiar had already made the first move. He had lit a fire in the magic-stone stove of the mansion's parlor. A handful of magic stones thrown in crackled as they burned, quickly illuminating the room and filling it with warmth.

As the room brightened, the summer-mansion-style interior of the house became visible to Yuder.

When the fire was out, he thought the place was too old and decrepit for anyone to stay alone, but it was not the case.

Though not luxurious, the interior was cozy, and the emblem of the aristocratic family who were the original owners was engraved in various places. The emblem was a long-tailed blue bird next to a shield.

"You won't have many opportunities to drink tea that I've personally prepared. Are you still leaving?"

Despite having stayed here for only two nights, Kishiar moved as freely as if he were the original owner.

Yuder watched as he filled the empty teapot with water, placed it on the stove, and scooped tea leaves from a shelf onto it. His movements were as fluid as flowing water.

"…"

Finally, Yuder sighed and sat in the chair Kishiar pointed to in front of the stove. Not long after, steam rose from the teapot, and a savory, aromatic scent tickled his nose. Kishiar poured the hot water

into two tea cups he had brought from somewhere and set them on the table.

“You don’t seem surprised. Usually, people are surprised when I do this.”

How regrettable it was that he couldn’t respond that he had drunk this tea many times in the past.

Swallowing a fragment of an old memory, Yuder shook his head.

“I am surprised, in my own way.”

“You don’t look like it.”

“That’s just my face.”

A grim expressionless face. Emotionless, chilling eyes. A pallid, sallow face like a corpse’s. These were common remarks Yuder had heard about his face since long ago.

“There’s no one who’s naturally like that. Anyone can learn to have a brighter expression. How about practicing in front of a mirror? I can help if you want.”

“…That won’t be necessary.”

“No need to refuse.”

Why on earth was he having this ridiculous conversation with Kishiar? Despite his resolve not to be swayed, Yuder found himself startled to realize that he was responding dutifully to his absurd comments.

‘I can’t afford to let my guard down.’

“How is the tea?”

Previously, Yuder had left without drinking the tea that Kishiar's adjutant, Nathan, had brewed at the Cavalry barracks. This time, he couldn't. As he lifted the tea cup with a feeling of lifting a heavy stone and moistened his lips, Kishiar asked as if he had been waiting.

"I'm from a peasant background, so I don't really know the taste of such fine things."

"So you mean you don't want to talk. Still, finish your tea."

Kishiar hit a nerve, and Yuder was momentarily at a loss for words.

"…That's not what I meant."

"I was just kidding."

Knowing it yet being struck by the other person's words wasn't a pleasant feeling. Feeling a slight headache, Yuder decided to finish his tea as quickly as possible.

"Yuder. How was it while you were carrying the box?"

But before he could take a sip, Kishiar started talking again. From his gaze, Yuder had a hunch that this was going to be the main point.

"What do you mean by 'how was it'?"

"When you first saw the stone yesterday and when you carried it in the box today. Didn't you feel any difference in the energy emanating from the stone, being so close to it?"

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Chapter 40

How was it? It was only then that Yuder understood that Kishiar's order to bring the box had not been thoughtless.

'Come to think of it.'

He recalled thinking that he had grown somewhat accustomed to the energy emanating from the Red Stone more than he had been the day before. He hadn't even had a conversation with Gakane.

Could it be that he hadn't just become accustomed to it?

"…I thought I had grown more accustomed to the energy it was emitting than yesterday."

"It's not that you've become accustomed to it, but the Red Stone has weakened."

Kishiar's response was succinct.

"The energy it was emitting has diminished a bit today. Don't you notice?"

Yuder suddenly turned his head to look at the box he had placed behind the pillar. He could not see the Red Stone inside, but the energy it was emitting was still perceptible. A strange energy that made the surroundings feel heavy and tingling, like being deep underwater.

If, as Kishiar said, it had diminished slightly from yesterday, there had to be a reason. Was there a plausible cause?

'…Could it be?'

“Is it because of the explosions that occurred yesterday? Because of the energy that escaped from the Red Stone?”

Yuder ventured to speak, his voice filled with uncertainty.

“I think that’s likely the case. There’s no other explanation.”

A satisfied smile crossed Kishiar’s face, as if he were speaking with a conversational partner who understood him well.

“Yuder, you’re clever enough to understand what that implies, aren’t you?”

“…The energy contained within that stone is not infinite.”

‘Bingo.’ Even without Kishiar’s response, Yuder understood what he had been trying to say. He tried to suppress his astonishment.

He had never heard such information in the last eleven years. Compared to the Red Stone, the World Sphere was a mere shell, its power nearly depleted. And it was impossible to recover what had already been lost.

But if, as Kishiar and his conjectures suggested, the tremendous power emitted by the Red Stone was not infinite but finite, like water in a jar, then that would mean?

‘Could the purification work done in the Pearl Tower in the past have been an attempt to separate the power of that stone?’

Back then, he had thought that the mages, consumed by their research, were simply destroying and shaving away at the stone, causing all its inherent power to scatter.

But what if that had been intentional? What if someone had tried to forcibly separate the power within it, just like Yuder of the past who wanted to possess the power within the stone…?

‘…That’s too much of a speculation at this point.’

Yuder tried to suppress his complicated thoughts, listening to Kishiar’s continuing words.

“The energy contained in that stone is completely different from any mana that has ever existed. It’s so remarkable that it can influence humans by its mere presence. We need to be particularly careful to ensure that none of it leaks out during transportation. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“…I’ll relay this to the others when we return.”

The Awakeners, unable to directly touch the stone, would protect it as they returned to the capital. Although it sounded easy, Yuder remembered a slight ‘accident’ that had occurred during this task in the past.

The very accident that became the catalyst for Kishiar to draw the divine sword and announce himself as its new master to the world.

Baseless rumors and the Imperial family’s downsized official statements. With time, the individuals involved had become nearly impossible to find, and the information Yuder managed to gather about the incident wasn’t much. After all, no one who could detail exactly what transpired then remained.

But it was beyond doubt that during that time, Kishiar and his party had engaged in a battle of such magnitude that he had to draw his divine sword against some adversaries.

When did that battle occur? It was highly likely to have happened quite a while after they had departed from this place, which was guarded by countless soldiers.

‘It’s tricky. The stone would limit or slow our movement, and the Peletta Knights would follow from a distance. If someone attacks us

in a situation where the group is separated…’

Yuder furrowed his brows after thinking that far.

“Do you suppose we might be ambushed on our return, Commander?”

Indeed. As soon as Kishiar had retrieved the Red Stone, he planned to return to the capital as quickly as possible. He even declared that he would leave without bidding farewell to General Gino, whom he had known for a long time, and ordered not to disband the Southern Army, which had been safeguarding this place for so long.

‘Kishiar ordering to move only after the news of his return to the capital is spread means we need even more stringent security than when we came here.’

However, if the same event that happened in the future were to occur this time, Yuder had to understand Kishiar’s intentions beforehand and instill a stronger sense of caution in him.

“Nathan didn’t explain it before we came here? Always be wary of the unexpected. After all, everyone in the world knows that the stone is here.”

“…Yes.”

“The reason no one coveted the stone, even though everyone knew it was here, was because no one had found or attempted a way to touch the stone. But things have changed now.”

Fortunately, Kishiar had a proper sense of caution.

“We must return to the capital as quickly as possible. I’m counting on your remarkable abilities should anything happen.”

“…Understood.”

Good. He had eagerly taken up the duty of protecting the Red Stone that Kishiar had outright entrusted to him. It was what he originally wanted, so he was quite pleased.

‘Even if attackers show up as they did before, as Kishiar said, this time I’m here.’

So, he would minimize Kishiar’s need to step in. Absolutely.

Yuder planned to gather the remaining Cavalry members as soon as they returned and prepare how to act in case of an emergency.

He had to get going since there was no time to lose.

“I enjoyed the tea. I’ll head back first.”

Yuder drained the remaining tea in one gulp and rose from his seat. Kishiar then opened his mouth with a dissatisfied look.

“You shouldn’t gulp down tea all at once.”

Crash!

Just then, something flew past his head with the sound of shattering glass, crashing into the magic stone heater. A dense smoke spread, and a chilling, intense murderous aura targeted Yuder.

‘An intruder!’

Yuder immediately cast a wide water barrier around himself and Kishiar.

With a ‘puff’ sound, something was felt rebounding off a barrier. Then something else flew towards it but was likewise repelled.

“What the hell is this!”

A bewildered deep voice echoed.

‘They must be new to something like this. They’re not professional killers, it seems.’

Many had laughingly considered his water-made wall to be weak. However, what Yuder had created was different. He could instantly freeze the water to be as solid as steel and then melt it again. That was the main reason why he often used water for defense.

‘It seems like several people have entered, but it’s too dark to see ahead. For now, let’s deal with this darkness…’

If he were to reveal all his abilities, he could just summon dozens of flames to push back the darkness, but he couldn’t do that. Yuder paused to think for a moment, then removed the barrier in front of him.

‘If there’s any guy with a sword, I should take it and use it.’

The magic stone heater had shattered, and smoke had exploded, making the interior as dark as pitch-black. However, to the focused Yuder, the positions of those inside felt distinctly clear.

“Commander, please stay still for now.”

Worried that Kishiar might try to grab the divine sword, Yuder advised him and then lightly waved his hand. If there was a steel sword in the place, it would respond to his power, escaping from its owner’s hand and flying towards him.

“Uh! What, what is this!”

Soon, one of the enemies not far away let out a bewildered sound. The sword that flew through the darkness landed in Yuder’s

hand. Yuder immediately gripped it and infused it with his power.

With the sound of a soft roar, flames climbing the blade quickly illuminated the smoke-filled darkness, revealing the surrounding scenery.

The interior was a mess due to the shattered magic stone stove, and several masked men appeared, not knowing what to do. Kishiar was also seen inside the barrier, his face as usual.

‘Good. The box containing the red stone…’

He glanced at the box that was still lying there, unnoticed by anyone. It was a relief.

“Who the hell are you guys?”

Yuder opened his mouth with a more relaxed attitude.

‘The Red Stone makes it inaccessible to ordinary people. Considering they got in… they must all be Awakeners. I wonder who sent them.’

“Where’s the Red Stone?”

A man standing at the front of the masked people growled in a low voice.

“Hand it over quietly. If you don’t want to die.”

“Are all of you Awakeners? Who sent you?”

“We’re the ones asking the questions, not you.”

Due to the energy emitted by the Red Stone, the air enveloping the entire mansion was very heavy. If they knew that the energy became stronger as it approached the stone, they could track its location without asking, but the enemies were unaware of this.

‘They know that the stone is here, but they don’t know its characteristics… It’s safe to say that there wasn’t a traitor among those involved in the recovery operation.’

Even though Yuder had lit the darkness with a flame-wrapped sword, its range wasn’t very wide. It was fortunate that he had pushed the box containing the red stone behind an inconspicuous pillar.

‘I need to uncover the mastermind, so I shouldn’t kill them. And Kishiar might go for the divine sword, so I should prevent that in advance.’

The tingling energy emitted by the Red Stone wasn’t good for either Yuder or Kishiar, but it was the same for the enemies. Besides, no matter how much Yuder had returned to his state from 11 years ago, he was not so weak as to lose to these enemies.

Having made his decision, Yuder looked back at Kishiar and spoke.

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Chapter 41

“I’ll handle this quickly. The area within the wall is safe, so all you need to do is watch, Commander.”

“Are you sure you can manage alone? From what I can see, there are at least ten of them.”

Kishiar asked, glancing at the enemies with a look of interest. Like Yuder, he showed no signs of tension.

“No problem.”

His casual tone, as if saying two plus two equals four, momentarily disrupted the enemies’ murderous intent.

“Are you unable to grasp the situation? If you’re choosing death…!”

‘Does he sound like someone ready to die?’

Yuder shook his head at the masked figure. He sighed at the thought of having to expend energy against these people, who couldn’t even properly assess his abilities.

“It’s you who fail to understand the situation. You know the Red Stone is here, but you seem unaware of its nature - that it explodes the moment it comes into contact with an Awakener’s body or abilities. If you falter, touching it could be fatal.”

“What did you say?”

Of course, Yuder had no intention of wasting the limited power held by the Red Stone in such a way. However, the enemies would not know this and would likely flinch even if they believed his words

to be nonsense. In a battle between Awakeners, the one unable to fully use their abilities was at a distinct disadvantage.

“If you think we’ll back down just because of that…!”

“Should I show you whether it’s true or not? All we need to do is set up a defensive wall.”

As if to make a point, Yuder moved his flame-encircled sword. The sight of the dancing flames caused tension to flicker across the enemies’ faces.

They didn’t know what abilities he had, but anyone who could easily snatch a sword, create a water barrier, and use flames while doing so was no less than a legendary mage. It was an incredible power.

“…What should we do?”

“Even so, we can’t back down. It’s a bluff.”

Among the enemies, the one who seemed to be thinking the most called out loudly enough for the others to hear.

“No one knows we’re here. He’s just buying time. You’d better discard any hope that someone will come to help. If you want to lessen your suffering…”

“Goodness. Even when I explain kindly, you talk too much.”

Before the enemy could finish his words, Yuder slightly swung his sword upward. Instantly, the flames surrounding the blade shot up like a pillar.

Boom!

It was a small pillar of fire, but its power was undeniable. The flame that pierced the ceiling and roof illuminated the night sky for a

moment before disappearing. It was powerful enough for those far away to sense something unusual and rush over.

"…"

"Now everyone should know you're here."

Looking at the remnants of the fire falling from the sky through the shattered window, Yuder chuckled. The dumbstruck looks on the enemies' faces were quite amusing.

"And what was it you said? 'If you want to lessen your suffering?'"

Through the gaps in their masks, he could see their eyes trembling.

"I suggest you start hoping your suffering will lessen."

"Damn it. Everyone, attack at once!"

As the enemies rushed at him all at once, Yuder swung his outstretched arm.

'If you wanted to overpower us, you should have attacked the moment you broke in.'

Upon hearing Yuder's words, the enemies knew they couldn't fully utilize their abilities. After all, they didn't know the exact location of the Red Stone. But Yuder was the opposite.

Even a mere graze from his flame-engulfed sword sent the enemies screaming and collapsing. A normal sword might cause minimal damage with a slight cut, but when fire seeped into the wound, it was a different story.

The flames rapidly penetrated the wound, immediately spreading throughout the victim's body.

‘Fortunately, they’re all physical enhancement types.’

There was no one more familiar with the battles between Awakeners in the current world than Yuder. Those who strengthened their bodies appeared strong in close combat due to their high offensive power, but their defensive power was weak.

Even if they could enhance their skin, it wasn’t invincible. Even the most conditioned individuals struggled to enhance softer parts of their bodies from the get-go, like the inside of their mouths or their eyeballs.

Yuder dodged a punch thrown by someone whose skin was as hard as stone and gently jabbed his sword into the opponent’s eye before pulling it out.

“Argh!”

When another enemy attacked with nails elongated like a sword, Yuder momentarily erected a small ice wall, seizing the moment of hesitation to slash at their side. The burning smell accompanied the transfer of fire to the body.

Someone hurled a spell, but since it was ultimately made of metal, it was enough to direct it towards the ground, and he even managed to redirect a few back at their casters.

“Aargh!”

It took Yuder less than a few minutes to take down more than ten enemies. The mansion was filled with individuals who were scorched black and writhing in agony, unable to die.

“The wall will now be dismissed since it’s over.”

“Very well.”

Yuder nonchalantly passed by these individuals, looking out through the broken window. He could see the torches carried by those rushing toward them from not too far away.

“Fortunately, no one has escaped.”

Fearing that delaying would allow someone to escape, he resolved the situation as quickly as possible. He couldn’t afford to let information about the Red Stone leak out.

Once Yuder verified the outside, he approached the pillar holding the Red Stone and brought the box containing it. Kishiar accepted it.

‘Now then… shall we check the mastermind behind this?’

The moment Kishiar retrieved the stone, he eyed his private quarters. The enemy’s intrusion was completely unexpected.

‘I thought they would come after I left this place.’

The fact that so many had invaded meant that the enemy had prepared for this operation for a long time and had underestimated Kishiar.

In other words, the enemy wasn’t someone who knew about Kishiar’s power.

Had they been waiting for such a moment in the past? If so, it would make sense even if Kishiar had dealt with them wielding the divine sword.

Yuder checked the faces of the ones still breathing. Out of the thirteen, eight were dead, and five were still alive.

“Your Grace!”

“Commander!”

While Yuder extinguished the fire on the bodies of the living and gathered them in one place, the sound of General Gino and the Cavalry members' voices came as the door shattered.

"Your Grace, it's Gino. Are you all right?"

"There was an intrusion, but it was quickly suppressed. I'm fine, so be at ease."

At Kishiar's leisurely response, General Gino seemed to calm down.

…Due to the box, I cannot reach you. I will send someone.

Moments later, the Cavalry members passed through the corridor and entered the reception room. Their eyes, filled with urgency as they hastily put on their uniforms, turned to horror upon seeing the several bodies lying on the floor.

"My goodness. What in the world?"

"Don't come any closer, Kanna."

Although they were dead, one could never be too cautious. Yuder had Kanna, who lacked combat abilities, step back and then looked at Kishiar. As if waiting, Kishiar opened his mouth.

"These five are still alive, so I plan to interrogate them immediately. This place is messy, so let's move them to the next room."

"The next room, you say?"

Gakane swallowed nervously and asked.

"Understood. But who exactly sent these people?"

"We'll have to find out now."

Yuder’s calm response cast a cold atmosphere over the room, which was broken by Kishiar’s low chuckle.

“Yes, we’ll find out now.”

Gakane’s shadow clone carried out the task of moving the intruders to the next room. The shadow clone, carrying all five people at once, strode into the room and threw them down.

“Kanna, Gakane, you two stand guard outside the room and make sure no one enters. Move the dead ones outside. The rest, come inside.”

“Yes.”

At Kishiar’s simple command, everyone moved swiftly and efficiently. Yuder closed the door after making sure Eldore siblings, and Kishiar had all entered the room, preventing any sounds from escaping.

“Now then.”

Kishiar approached the groaning men, his relaxed smile gone. His cold, red eyes bore into the enemies.

“Who sent you? Answer me.”

……..

Although they were clearly alive, the enemies did not answer. Kishiar turned his head quietly and looked at the Eldore siblings, who stepped forward.

“So, we just need to make them talk, right?”

“Leave it to us.”

The Eldore sibling's specialty wasn't their mobility, but their extraordinary physical enhancement abilities. Although there were many people with abilities to strengthen their bodies, the Eldore siblings' abilities were quite exceptional.

As they stepped forward with their innocent faces, the siblings smiled, and their once slender arms and legs began to swell.

With thumping and ripping sounds, their clothes were torn apart without mercy. The enemies, who had been firmly clenching their mouths shut, began to tremble uncontrollably.

Moments later, two massive figures with rock-solid muscles stood where the Eldore siblings had been. It was the transformed Eldore siblings, their power activated.

"Remarkable, every time I see it."

Yuder thought that their ability was incredibly visually striking, as he looked at the cute faces attached to the grotesquely swollen bodies.

With their childlike innocence intact, their bodies had transformed like giants, causing most enemies to lose their will to fight and flee as if they had encountered a massive monster. The enemies before them seemed no different.

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Chapter 42

“Finn. Should we start with the fingers? Or perhaps the toes?”

“I prefer toes.”

“Fine. Let’s crush the toes first.”

“W-wait.”

One of the enemies tried to crawl backwards, bowing his head. But Finn’s foot moved faster.

“I’ll talk. I’ll talk… Wait! Aaaaagh!”

Thud. Finn stepped on the enemy’s leg and a crumbling sound echoed.

“I’ll… I’ll talk…!”

“Hold on, wait…!”

The enemies gasped for air in unison, but Kishiar simply laughed and didn’t stop the Eldore siblings.

Then, inside the room, the thumping sound of earth-shattering and faint screams reverberated.

“Ugh… ugh…!”

“So, ready to talk now?”

Kishiar casually asked again, looking at the enemies covered in burns, their faces wet with tears and snot.

“You attempted to assassinate a member of the imperial family. Your lives are already forfeit. Isn’t it better to die cleanly than to be dragged off to the Pearl Tower for experimentation?”

“It might be more effective to say you’ll spare the first one who talks.”

Finn Eldore, back in his original form, suggested another method, tilting his head. Yuder also thought his method was much better.

“Really? Well then….”

“We, we wrote an… oath….”

Before Kishiar could finish, one of the fallen enemies murmured.

“We agreed… not to talk… so I can’t…”

“An oath?”

A peculiar look crossed Kishiar’s red eyes.

What they were talking about was probably similar to the magic oath that the Cavalry had used to promise not to disclose any information about the Red Stone retrieval mission.

Oaths were expensive and were rarely used except when those with considerable power were assigning important missions. Furthermore, they were not readily sold to just anyone.

This meant that the person who hired them had significant power. Kishiar, his eyes narrowed, turned towards Yuder.

“Yuder, keep this for a moment.”

He handed a box containing the Red Stone to Yuder and approached the fallen ones.

‘What is he trying to do?’

Yuder watched him curiously. Kishiar was known to have great physical abilities, as far as Yuder knew.

Breaking the power of an oath was not impossible, but it was known to be feasible only for high-ranking mages or priests.

“Keep what you’ve just seen a secret.”

Kishiar turned to the Eldore siblings and Yuder, winked playfully, and extended his hand. Then a white light emanated from his fingertips, enveloped them, and faded after a moment.

‘…Is that divine power?’

Yuder, who always maintained his composure, was momentarily taken aback. If his eyes weren’t deceiving him, what he just saw was undoubtedly the power used by the priests of the Sun God to purge impurities.

“It’s a useless power passed down through the blood. I never thought I’d use it like this.”

The Eldore siblings, oblivious to all this, showed no reaction, but Yuder was different. The imperial bloodline had divine power? This was something he had never heard of, even when he had served the emperor closely in his previous life.

Moreover, Kishiar had never mentioned to him that he had such a power, not even at the moment of his death.

“There used to be Awakeners among the priests. But…”

Their numbers were too few, and those who did possess powers had abilities that were embarrassingly weak. As a result, the idea

that divine power and the power of the Red Stone neutralized each other became accepted as a standard.

The fact that there wasn't a single priest-origin Awakener in the Cavalry until Yuder's death added credibility to this notion.

However, Kishiar was a powerful individual even among the Awakeners. Moreover, he was acknowledged by the divine sword, which was notoriously selective about its wielders.

The individuals the divine sword had chosen as its masters, though not at the time of acceptance, eventually all became sword masters with strength significant enough to make history.

There had been no precedent of a sword master becoming an Awakener, but it existed in the future. About a year later, one of the sword masters in a foreign country would awaken, serving as that very example.

And while not of the sword master level, there were quite a few instances of strong knights who knew how to use aura becoming Awakeners. So Yuder didn't find it strange that Kishiar, who was acknowledged by the divine sword, had become an Awakener.

However, there had never been a case of someone with such strong divine power that they could break the power of the oath becoming a powerful Awakener.

If he was deemed worthy of the divine sword's approval, then it was certain that Kishiar had the skill to become a sword master, even if not right now.

But on top of that, he possessed such extraordinary divine power that he could forcibly break the power of the oath, and furthermore, he awakened as a powerful Awakener?

That was truly an inconceivable matter.

Was such a case even possible? Even to Yuder, who could manipulate five attributes at will, it seemed like an absurdly far-fetched idea.

To his knowledge, there wasn't a single human who possessed all three aspects: the power of the Awakeners, aura, and divine power. Despite seeing Kishiar use divine power right in front of him, it was still hard to believe.

He had assumed that the reason Kishiar, despite having powerful abilities, didn't fully use his power was simply due to his leadership style, prioritizing command. But in truth, he could also use divine power and wanted to keep it a secret?

'What could be the reason for wanting to keep it a secret?'

If he was hiding such an unparalleled ability, there must be a reason. And perhaps that reason might provide the answer to the questions about Kishiar's death that remained for Yuder.

Kishiar La Orr, who at the moment of death, as if he had been waiting for it, quietly accepted everything and did nothing.

A duke in name only, unable to vie for the emperor's succession, and a man who had lived a lifelong bachelor. He had always wondered why such a smart and capable individual had accepted his position without vying for the emperor's throne.

If Yuder had the same power and had been born a prince, he would never have lived in such obscurity.

'When I get back, I'll have to investigate whether divine power truly descends to the imperial bloodline, and how the other dukes of prince origin who lived like Kishiar fared.'

While Yuder was lost in thought, Kishiar continued to interrogate the intruders nonchalantly.

“Now, you should be able to talk. Answer me, who sent you?”

“W-we, we don’t exactly, um, know ourselves.”

The intruder answered, gasping in pain.

“We are all mercenaries from different places. Our client never revealed their identity and only contacted us through intermediaries and letters…”

“Mercenaries?”

The Eldore siblings muttered to each other, glancing at each other’s faces. Only then did Yuder stop his thoughts on Kishiar and lift his head.

‘Not professional assassins, then… I see. They were all mercenaries.’

“You must have heard something from your client beforehand. What did you know when you came here? What were you planning to do after stealing the Red Stone? Or was the Red Stone just an excuse, and the client wanted me killed?”

“No, no.”

At Kishiar’s question, the intruder cried out with a contorted face.

“We’re lowlifes, but we know we won’t die a decent death if we do such a thing. Assassinating an imperial family member, we wouldn’t accept such a request.”

“How amusing. Assassinating an imperial family member is scary, but stealing the Red Stone is fine?”

When Hinn added her comments as if for the intruders to hear, regret and anger flashed across the bloodied faces of the intruders.

“…The client said there would only be one person, Duke Peletta, staying here. If we timed it right, we could have handled it easily. We didn’t think anyone else would be here.”

Fearful eyes discreetly turned towards Yuder. Even without moving a finger, Yuder, as reflected in the intruders’ eyes, was as good as a grim reaper.

But Yuder was not looking at him. If those words were true, this was no ordinary problem.

‘The information was completely leaked.’

Yuder took a fleeting glance at Kishiar’s expressionless face. When was it decided that he would come here to retrieve the Red Stone? Whoever planned this daring act must have accessed that information very early. There was no doubt about it.

Furthermore, the fact that the location where Kishiar was staying was reported in real-time meant that the instigator was much closer than expected.

“Seems like they knew this place very well. Was that all the information they gave you?”

At Kishiar’s question, the intruders hurriedly responded, each adding a little more information.

“No, at first they just told us to go to the Orr Empire and wait until the messenger arrived.”

“We waited at the edge of the mountain range for a few days, and then we received a letter yesterday to move here…!”

“We were told to observe the mansion and if it seemed like the Red Stone had been retrieved, to invade and steal it. We really thought we only had to steal the stone. After retrieving it, we were to

return to our original hiding place and wait until the client contacted us…!”

“A letter that arrived yesterday…”

Kishiar murmured meaningfully, narrowing his eyes. Surely, he must have realized what Yuder was thinking.

Even the Cavalry members who came to retrieve the Red Stone in person had only just found out that only the Awakeners could approach the Red Stone.

Therefore, the likelihood that the one who sent the intruders knew this fact in advance and gathered only the Awakeners was very low. Yet the fact that they sent only the Awakeners meant they deemed it necessary to have people with powerful abilities.

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Chapter 43

Yuder visualized the unknown client in his mind. A figure of wealth and power, and incredibly meticulous. Likely, the client had chosen to hire mercenaries to ensure that even if the tail was stepped on, no harm would come to them.

They had gathered and dispatched over ten Awakeners, probably figuring that would be enough to confront a Kishiar and obtain what they wanted.

Had they known the extent of Kishiar's power, they would have realized that a dozen or so were insufficient. However, by sheer coincidence, Yuder's presence at the site was the client's downfall.

"The client had a proxy, you said. How did you contact them?"

"Th-they were always different people. Moreover, since we entered the Orr Empire, the proxy never appeared in person. It was always through letters…"

"Naturally, you burned all the letters."

"…Yes."

Kishiar fell silent, seemingly lost in thought. His gaze drifted to the box Yuder held. The box, containing the Red Stone, still radiated a heavy and sharp aura.

"Alright. I'll ask one last thing. If you were successful in retrieving it, where were you planning to take it?"

Where could they hide from the watchful eyes of the numerous Imperial soldiers patrolling the mountains, who had been guarding the Red Stone? Where could these ten or so people be hidden?

Everyone’s gaze turned to the intruder’s mouth.

“That place, it’s, from here… uh…uh?”

Suddenly, the man who had been speaking choked and bent over, retching.

“Cough, hack. Urgh, aah!”

The man’s body started to swell grotesquely at a rapid pace, turning a violet hue. Seeing his eyes bulging as if they were about to burst, Yuder felt an ominous premonition.

“A barrier!”

Instinctively, he created a barrier of water and air around everyone just as the man’s body exploded. A black mass spread in all directions, releasing a toxic energy into the confined space.

“…What on earth happened?”

After the explosion subsided, Finn mumbled, his mouth agape in a daze. The scene that had unfolded was truly horrific. Even the remaining intruders, who had still been alive, were now all dead.

The room, from ceiling to floor, had transformed into a terrible sight, melted by the toxic energy. If Yuder had not quickly put up a barrier, they would have shared the same fate.

“What was that noise… Commander! Are you okay?”

Gakane, who had startled and opened the door, was shocked at the sight inside the room.

“I’m fine. Is everyone else alright?”

Even Kishiar looked around with a furrowed brow, seeming surprised by the unexpected event.

“We’re fine.”

“We’re okay too.”

After Yuder and the Eldore siblings responded, Kishiar’s gaze turned to the box holding the Red Stone. Yuder subtly nodded to confirm that it too was intact. The Red Stone in his hand was safe, and so were his companions.

“That was a close call. I didn’t expect they would have laid a double layer of the Oath’s prohibition.”

“The Oath’s prohibition? But you said you broke it, Commander.”

“Yes, I definitely did break one. But I didn’t expect that they would use two different types of Oaths.”

At Hinn’s question, Kishiar let out a dry chuckle. It wasn’t laughter born of genuine amusement, but more of disbelief that their enemy could have gone so far, something they hadn’t anticipated.

“Originally, only one oath could be written at a time. But occasionally, there are cases where people use illegally made oaths to impose a double prohibition. The stronger the prohibition becomes, the more terrible the consequences of breaking it, a wicked strategy indeed. We’ve been outplayed.”

During his time as the commander, Yuder had seen people imposing double prohibitions to control others. Such people usually knew the prohibition imposed on them very well and never dared to speak about it.

But those who had just died unexpectedly seemed completely unaware that a double prohibition had been placed on their oath. If they had known, even if Kishiar had used his power to lift the prohibition once, they would not have opened their mouths so easily.

‘…Did they deliberately create this situation?’

The body of the man, shattered into pieces by the swelling prohibition, was saturated with a potent poison, lethal at the slightest touch. If it had grazed his comrades or Kishiar, even if it didn’t kill them, it would have caused severe injuries.

Yuder felt an astounding, silent malice directed towards Kishiar. Now, with Yuder present, they could fend it off, but what about before his return? Had Kishiar also faced such attacks before, and was he truly unscathed?

“Commander, do you have any suspicion about who might be behind this?”

Yuder asked Kishiar quietly.

“Well…… I’m not sure yet.”

Kishiar shook his head, his expression inscrutable, making it unclear whether he genuinely had no suspicions, or if he had some idea but did not wish to share it with his team.

“Unfortunately, we couldn’t find out where they were hiding, so I plan to order General Gino to spread out and search.”

“Now?”

“The sooner we find them, the higher the chances of finding traces they didn’t manage to erase.”

After saying this, Kishiar looked again at the box quietly nestled in Yuder’s embrace.

“However, we should not participate in the search and should leave immediately. Pack up and get ready to move out, despite the fatigue.”

Kishiar seemed to feel strongly that they could no longer remain here. Yuder agreed. It was the middle of the night, and they couldn't move alongside the Peletta Knights, so it would be dangerous, but being away from this place, which was under the unseen gaze of an unknown enemy, might be better.

"Understood."

The team members, with serious expressions, began to exit the mansion one by one.

Yuder looked at the bodies strewn on the floor, the shattered windows, the broken ceiling, and the destroyed furniture, and thought that the mansion's owner would shed quite a few tears later. The elegance of the mansion when they first entered had long since vanished.

"Yuder."

As he was about to turn around, Kishiar quietly called his name from behind. When he looked back, Kishiar was staring at the box containing the Red Stone again.

"Ah, I almost forgot to return the box to you, Commander."

Yuder, interpreting the gaze as a silent command to return the box, reached out his arm.

"No, the box is fine. But your hand, what happened to it?"

…Hand?

Only then did Yuder realize that it was not the box but his own hand holding it that had caught Kishiar's attention.

'Ah. That spot where the energy from the Red Stone exploded through yesterday… Hmm?'

On the back of Yuder’s hand, a purple bruise had swelled to the size of a small bird’s egg.

It hadn’t been that large when he had gone to retrieve the Red Stone earlier in the day. It was a tiny bruise, as if punctured with a nail. When exactly had it grown this much?

There was no pain, and he hadn’t felt any signs of the bruise growing, so Yuder looked at it in surprise.

‘It’s definitely bigger, it’s not just my imagination.’

“Judging by your expression, you only just noticed,” Kishiar said, apparently guessing the situation from Yuder’s expression and sighing softly.

“I wanted to see the extent of your abilities, but I didn’t wish for you to get injured in the process.”

“No, it’s not that. I didn’t know because it didn’t hurt.”

“So, what does that make me, who said I’d treat you well?”

With that, Kishiar extended a hand towards Yuder. His palm faced upwards, as if inviting him to dance. Yuder was momentarily captivated by the elegant movement, almost forgetting they were inside a half-destroyed mansion.

“Put your hand here, I’ll treat it. You should put the box down, just in case it reacts.”

““Are you going to use your divine power?”

“What else could it be?”

Kishiar’s response was gentle when Yuder asked out of curiosity. He wanted to say it was okay, but his curiosity to verify if Kishiar could truly use his divine power was stronger.

As Yuder hesitated and put the box down, Kishiar immediately grabbed the bruised hand.

Yuder unknowingly tensed his shoulders.

“Relax. This is a pure contact with no impure intentions.”

Kishiar whispered lowly, a twinkle in his eyes, as if he had sensed Yuder’s movement.

“…I wasn’t thinking that way.”

“Hahaha.”

Kishiar burst into laughter at Yuder’s stiff response.

Living and working alone for a long time, Yuder’s hand was knotted and scarred. Unlike his, Kishiar’s hand was pale and smooth.

But that beautiful hand was surprisingly cold and hard, like a swordsman’s hand hardened by the hilt of a sword.

The touch of that hand, which he had long forgotten, tried to force back memories into Yuder’s mind.

Yuder bit his lip and tried to suppress unnecessary thoughts. From Kishiar’s hand, a white light flowed out, gently covering the back of Yuder’s hand. It was an unmistakably divine power, even more certain when felt directly.

‘At this level, it would be among the top ranks of the priests of the Sun God…’

“Is it that surprising for me to use divine power?”

Kishiar asked softly. Yuder was startled for a moment, thinking his thoughts had been read, but then he nodded.

“…Yes.”

“Well, it’s understandable, given that very few people know about this.”

“Can… Can His Majesty the Emperor also use such divine power, besides you?”

“Of course, he can.”

The answer came easily, as if it was the most natural thing.

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Chapter 44

“Why then, do you keep that fact a secret? There’s no need to hide it, is there?”

“I suppose so. But it’s a power that, when revealed, wouldn’t bring much good. It’s as if it might as well not exist. I think it’s better to believe it doesn’t from the start.”

At such a seemingly jesting response, Yuder blinked in puzzlement, to which Kishiar responded with a smile.

“Seeing you risk your life and use your strength to save others time and time again is what made me decide to use this power. If it were revealed that I’ve used it, my adjutant Nathan would be furious. He might even forbid me from going out at night. So, keep it a secret, will you? Let it be our little pact.”

Yuder stared at Kishiar’s smile, unable to discern what was truth and what was deception.

Could someone truly exist who, for such a simple reason, wouldn’t use their healing power until the moment of their death? But he couldn’t ask the Kishiar of the past for an answer.

“…I understand. But, may I ask one more thing?”

“Sure, as long as it’s not whether I possess the power of the awakened, the divine power, and the power accumulated as a knight.”

Yuder was momentarily lost for words. Kishiar smiled, looking like a boy who had successfully played a fun prank.

“You’re the only one in this place who knows that I was chosen by the divine sword. I guessed you’d have questions as soon as you saw me use divine power.”

Kishiar’s red eyes, like a sun illuminating all, seemed to read everything in a person’s mind. His nonchalance, despite seemingly having figured out Yuder’s thoughts yet not hinting at it until now, was masterful.

“…Is that possible?”

Yuder asked softly, deliberately omitting the subject ‘the three powers’. Though his comrades had left and there was no one within earshot, one could never be too sure.

“Well, what do you think?”

“If it’s true, then what in the world could harm you?”

That is, assuming he deliberately chose not to dodge an incoming attack.

“…Even if anyone charges at you, they wouldn’t stand a chance.”

Kishiar, adept at reading people’s intentions, couldn’t discern the fleeting memories of the past that had momentarily flickered in Yuder’s dark eyes.

“Haha, you’re more skilled at flattery than I thought. I never would’ve guessed, considering you never seemed the type to say things just to please.”

“I merely stated the truth.”

“Yes, your words might indeed be true. But, what does it matter?”

A strange look briefly flitted over his red eyes.

“No matter what I possess, it’s meaningless to me. What I truly need isn’t anything like that.”

His words suggested that all of it was insignificant. Yuder was once again at a loss for words.

Such things?

To belittle the incredible notion of a single human possessing the power of an Awakener, divine power, and aura…

The Kishiar he had met upon returning to the past was even more mysterious and unfathomable than the one he remembered. Even Yuder, who had experienced all sorts of things and grown over the past decade, couldn’t clearly comprehend him.

“Then, what do you believe you need, sir?”

“Do you want to know that?”

The once youthful, carefree, and world-weary energy in Kishiar’s gaze vanished in an instant. He once again adopted the leisurely and languid countenance of a duke, his eyes gently curving.

“Accept the position of Cavalry Deputy, then.”

“Deputy… please wait a moment. There’s no such position, is there?”

Indeed, no such position existed in the past. Kishiar had delegated all assistant duties to his adjutant, Nathan Zuckerman. Anything relating to the Cavalry was entrusted to the deputy commanders, including Yuder. It had always been sufficient. But now, a position as Cavalry Deputy?

“Just make one. It seems like you’re reluctant to take on the role of Deputy Commander, so I thought about creating a comfortable

position that no one would be responsible for.”

Kishiar responded in a smooth tone, as if he had thought of this all along.

“The Cavalry has been established not too long ago, so it should be possible to create such a position. I’m very fortunate.”

“…”

“So, you don’t like this idea either?”

Kishiar’s hand, radiating a white light, tightened its grip on Yuder’s hand. With his treatment not yet complete, Yuder had no choice but to neither resist nor flee.

Yuder shot a somewhat disrespectful look at the man before him, who seemed to thoroughly enjoy seeing him in a predicament.

“Why do you value me so highly?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Your determination to repay those who threaten your life with their own lives, your excellent judgement to protect others at the cost of your own safety. Your combat skills are as proficient as a knight who’s been through countless battlefields. If I don’t value you highly, then who should I value?”

“I’m not the only one like that. Everyone else was the same.”

“The other members did very well too. But the calmness you showed is something that can’t be acquired through just a few months of training. I highly regard that.”

The light flowing from Kishiar’s hand stopped. However, he still held Yuder’s hand. In his grip, a certain determination could be sensed. Looking down at the hand held by Kishiar, Yuder opened his mouth.

“If I refuse again…”

“Then I will create the position of Cavalry Training Officer.”

Even if he refused that offer, another similar one would follow.

Yuder realized that Kishiar had already made up his mind. When he had suggested it before, it felt somewhat tentative, but this time was different. As Yuder had rejoined the Cavalry, there were limits to refusing the Commander’s will. Even more so if it was sincere.

“I understand.”

In the end, Yuder nodded.

“You’ve made a wise decision. We’ll discuss the details when we return.”

Kishiar released his grip with a smile.

“…Hm?”

However, a moment later, he opened his eyes wide in rare surprise, his face a picture of confusion. Yuder also felt a sense of bewilderment.

“This is…”

The bruise on the back of his hand, which should have completely healed by now, hadn’t vanished entirely. It had only shrunk to its original small size, a small, dark red spot remaining on the skin. The two fell silent, looking at the spot.

“…It wasn’t an ordinary injury.”

Kishiar’s eyes narrowed.

“Tell me exactly how you got hurt, Yuder Aile.”

There was no need to hide the reason for his injury. Yuder looked at his hand and opened his mouth.

“When the Gakane’s shadow clone touched the Red Stone and exploded yesterday, I was a bit late in putting up the barrier. I think it’s a trace of the energy from the stone that pierced through my hand.”

“Energy from the stone?”

Kishiar furrowed his eyebrows as he looked at the box placed at Yuder’s feet. His eyes seemed to race with countless thoughts in an instant.

“So… there’s no pain?”

“Yes.”

There was no pain even when the bruise grew. It was the same now. Yuder clenched and unclenched his fist lightly, feeling a strange sensation.

“That’s fortunate at least. But if anything feels off, report it immediately. We will need to investigate the injury once we return.”

“Understood. I will also check if the other comrades have similar injuries.”

“Commander, Yuder! What happened inside? General Gino is worried.”

Just then, Gakane’s voice rang out. Kishiar and Yuder briefly met each other’s gaze before rushing out of the mansion.

Outside the mansion were the Cavalry members, General Gino, the Peletta Knights who had rushed here without sleep, and the soldiers. General Gino and the Peletta Knights were able to stand at

a similar distance as the Cavalry members, but others could not. Faces staring from afar were full of confusion.

Despite having protected the place for two years, the Imperial Army was of no help when those coveting the Red Stone infiltrated.

It was fortunate that Kishiar was unharmed; otherwise, it would have been a great calamity. Naturally, General Gino, who led them, didn't look well either.

"I'm glad to see Your Highness unharmed. However, the fact that those beasts could reach this place is my responsibility. It's deeply shameful. Now that they're all dead, what should we do?"

"I haven't been hurt at all, so don't worry, General. However, since the dead had been hiding around here for days, release your soldiers to search the vicinity immediately, and inform me as soon as you find anything."

"Understood."

General Gino turned around and immediately began giving orders to his soldiers loudly.

After most of the soldiers quickly disappeared, Kishiar called the general closer and said he would be leaving soon.

Having seen the audacious moves of the enemy, General Gino didn't stop Kishiar. He immediately called one of the soldiers who remained at his side.

"Go and fetch the Misty Wind Horses right away."

Despite it being late at night, preparations for departure were made in an instant. Kishiar, having draped a long cloak to cover his uniform, received the box containing the Red Stone from Yuder.

His figure, lightly leaping onto the Misty Wind Horse and grabbing the reins, resembled a manifestation of the Sun God who had emerged to illuminate the darkness.

“I will lead the way. The Cavalry members will follow right behind, and the Knights will follow as closely as possible. We will run without rest, so be careful not to lose your way.”

“Understood!”

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Chapter 45

The Peletta Knight, who had served as a guide on their journey, had given Kishiar the special magic stone that indicated he could handle all the horses.

When their lord, whom they should protect, decided to lead in the most dangerous situation, the Knights should have naturally tried to dissuade him, but they remained relatively calm. Yuder read an absolute trust and belief in Kishiar from them.

“We’re setting off!”

Leaving General Gino behind, they departed from the Southern Army base. The mood was extremely heavy and solemn due to their sudden departure under unfavorable circumstances.

Eleven Misty Wind Horses ran unimpeded across the fields blanketed by the darkness of night. These horses faced no difficulty seeing in the dark, easily avoiding any obstacles in their path.

The bodies of the horses, glowing as if sprinkled with powdered pearls, were the only sources of light in the place. Yuder gripped the reins more tightly, enduring the chilling and hair-raising sensation.

No matter how convenient and fast a mode of transportation, an entity not born from nature was diametrically opposed to it.

Kishiar rode his horse in a completely different manner than when they had arrived. Thanks to the incredibly fast pace, harsh even, by the time day broke, they had already traveled far beyond the mountain range.

“Yuder. We need to talk.”

Gakane, who had dismounted the horse to rest, approached Yuder and spoke in a lowered voice.

“What exactly happened yesterday? You took down those guys with the Commander, so you must know something more?”

“I’m not really sure.”

In truth, Yuder had taken them down alone, but he didn’t bother correcting Gakane. There was no benefit in flaunting his abilities.

“I was about to leave the box when they showed up. I just took them down to defend myself.”

“How could so many of them have been here in advance? They figured out that we had recovered the Red Stone so quickly….”

“Kanna Wand. Come over here.”

Just then, Kishiar called Kanna. Everyone’s gaze instantly focused on Kanna. Surprised, Kanna, who was opening a water bottle, turned her head.

“Yes?”

“Can you read these items while we rest?”

Kishiar took out several items from his pocket. A torn glove, a broken dagger handle, and a shattered piece of dice. Yuder recognized them as belonging to the dead intruders.

It seemed he had taken them when he briefly entered the mansion before their departure.

“Of course. I’ll give it a try.”

Kanna’s expression turned serious. She had been unable to shake off her worry, believing that she had been of no help in this

mission. She took a deep breath at the opportunity that had come once again.

First, Kanna held the glove. As she closed her eyes and focused, a faint energy rippled within her palm.

“…I can only read personal information about the owner. This is the toughest material the owner possessed, so he often wore this glove during battles. And… he also used it when shaking hands with someone. It seems like a very strong memory. He placed a large bag of money on top of the glove. After counting the money, he removed the glove and marked the count with his finger….”

After saying this, Kanna opened her eyes. She had made a lot of progress over the months, training and using her ability countless times.

Before she joined the Cavalry, there were many things she couldn’t read, and most of the information she could decipher amounted to fragments of words. But now, she knew she could always decipher something. The information she could read had become much more detailed. Mostly, it consisted of the most potent memories related to the object.

“The one who gave the money is likely connected to the one I’m seeking.”

Kishiar nodded and handed her the next object. It was a broken dagger handle. Kanna gripped it and focused once again.

“Fear. I can read the immense fear and regret the last person who held this felt. And resentment towards someone. The person who commissioned them… a stranger they’d never met… a noble from the Empire.”

“A noble from the Empire?”

Gakane, who had been silently listening, asked in surprise. Kanna opened her eyes. Her blue irises were filled with a serious look.

“It’s a word the person holding the dagger thought strongly of. They seem to have speculated among themselves that the identity of the person behind the commission might be a noble from the Empire.”

The atmosphere turned cold in an instant at Kanna’s words. The one to break it was Kishiar, who still bore a look of interest.

“Well… considering what they’ve done, it’s not an impossibility.”

“But why would a noble from our nation dare to act against our commander, a member of the imperial family? Isn’t the commander’s retrieval of the Red Stone for the peace of this nation? Why on earth would…”

As Gakane mumbled in confusion, Kishiar responded with a slightly deeper smile instead of an answer.

“Nobles have their own ways, Gakane Bolunwald. If everyone had the same loyalty as you, we would be quite comfortable by now.”

It was a loaded statement. Gakane seemed taken aback, as if he’d said something inappropriate, but Yuder recalled memories from a past life.

In his previous life, Yuder had gained some insight into the power structure of the Empire by attending many parties and gatherings at the Emperor’s command.

The people believed that the Emperor held the greatest power in the world and that those serving him were filled with genuine loyalty. But that wasn’t the reality. The four Duke families, long-standing

throughout the Empire’s history, were as arrogant as if the nation had four additional kings.

Remembering the audacious faces of those even the imperial family had to tread lightly around, Yuder could understand what Kishiar meant. Indeed, nobles had their own ways.

“Now, the last object.”

Kanna held the last object, a broken dice, in her hand. From her concentrated face with closed eyes, a deep focus unlike anything seen before emanated.

“The owner of this object… was addicted to gambling. They needed a lot of money. They had awakened their power, but seemed dissatisfied with their unchanged life. Besides, fear and regret… similar to the previous objects I read.”

Kanna opened her eyes and looked at the commander’s face. He was nodding with a satisfied look.

“Good. Thanks to you, we’ve obtained some interesting information. But can you read the stone inside the box?”

Kanna, who had just been smiling brightly at having her ability acknowledged, became serious again.

“I can only read the history of the box. I’m sorry.”

“What a pity for such a good ability.”

Kishiar expressed his regret sincerely. Yuder agreed as well.

How wonderful it would be if Kanna’s ability had advanced enough to read stones without direct contact. Judging by the current rate of progress, it wouldn’t take long.

However, if things went as they had in the past, Kishiar would head to the palace with the Red Stone as soon as he arrived in the capital. By then, even if Kanna's ability had developed, the stone would have already become the World Sphere.

'If only I could prevent or delay that.'

Previously, he had thought that the ignorant mages of the Pearl Tower had recklessly chipped away at the power of the Red Stone and damaged the original. But having participated in this mission and realizing the extraordinary power within the Red Stone, his thoughts had changed.

Several ways to protect the Red Stone whirled confusingly in Yuder's mind and then disappeared.

The easiest way, of course, was to make Kishiar himself realize the value of the stone. Then, he could persuade the emperor not to send the stone to the Pearl Tower.

Yuder's gaze stealthily turned toward Kishiar.

—

At the same time, in the imperial palace in the northern part of the Orr Empire's capital.

A man with grizzled hair and a young boy were sitting across from each other, setting up several intricately shaped pieces for a strategic game. At a glance, it seemed like an old man playing with his young grandson, but a closer look revealed that their relationship was not so close.

The old man's eyes were well-collected, cruel, and cunning, and the boy sitting in front of him had a fierce beauty that did not match his young age.

“The Duke of Peletta seems to have succeeded in his retrieval. He said he would be back soon,” the old man muttered as he moved a piece on the board. His voice was nonchalant.

“Is that so?”

“Were you already aware?”

“I had to know naturally when the excitement in the Sun Palace reached the Bright Palace.”

The Bright Palace was a palace built for the crown prince. And the boy, with the golden hair and red eyes characteristic of the Orr Empire’s imperial family, was none other than Prince Katchian La Orr, who was to be the next emperor.

“Did you also hear about the incident of those who coveted it appearing in the middle?”

The old man added another piece to his offensive. Despite the aggressive move, the Crown Prince was not flustered. He skillfully moved his piece to dodge and opened his mouth.

“Yes, I heard about that too. They say the subordinates of the Duke of Peletta resolved it adeptly. They say the monsters came from somewhere.”

“Unfortunately, it seems that has not been revealed.”

“Indeed. Quite a pity. They could have been on good terms with us.”

The words carried a ruthless intent, but the Crown Prince’s expression was utterly calm.

“The Duke of Peletta is not the fool others make him out to be. He cunningly managed to establish that organization. He must never

be underestimated.”

“I thought he was a man too busy looking after himself to hide such a claw. It turns out those who scored this time were not Peletta Knights but members of a strange group the Duke established.”

At that, the Crown Prince stopped moving his piece for the first time and lifted his head.

“Was its name the Cavalry?”

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Chapter 46

“Was its name the Cavalry?”

“I believe so. Kiolle has been making quite a fuss about them.”

The old man shook his head slowly, his brow furrowing.

“My ears are still ringing.”

“Ah, due to the incident where they were humiliated by a commoner not long ago.”

“I can’t believe such a foolish one came from our house. We put him in the knight’s order to gain some prestige, but instead of behaving, he came back humiliated by a mere commoner. It’s a worry. He still doesn’t understand what he did wrong.”

“Don’t be too upset, Duke Diarca. Not all children can be exceptional.”

Upon hearing the young crown prince’s cool comfort, the old man, Duke Diarca, smiled.

“That’s true. It seems that all the outstanding abilities that run in our blood have been granted to you, Your Highness.”

“You flatter me too much.”

They returned their focus to the game. At first, the crown prince’s pieces seemed to be simply avoiding those of the old man. But as time passed, surprisingly, the fleeing pieces began to knock down the old man’s, starting to gain the upper hand. What seemed like retreat was, in fact, a meticulous strategy.

In the end, the game concluded with the crown prince's victory. The crown prince spoke as he toppled the last piece the duke had placed.

"His Majesty will bestow rewards upon Duke Peletta and his subordinates this time."

"To make a name for themselves throughout the continent, that would be best."

"I'm very curious about what grand game they plan to play, investing so much effort. My expectations are high."

"Is that all you're curious about? Aren't you finally going to see the famous stone? That's what I'm most curious about."

At the duke's words, the crown prince simply grinned.

"Yes, everyone will see it soon."

—

Duke Kishiar La Orr of Peletta returned to the capital, having successfully completed the secret mission assigned by the emperor. As his departure and return were both quiet, almost no one knew he had left his post.

Only Kishiar and those who journeyed with him felt a mix of emotions as they entered the capital. The worrying times, fearing someone might target the Red Stone before they returned to the capital, were over.

"You all did well."

Upon reaching the front of the Cavalry barracks, Kishiar dismounted and briefly praised everyone.

“It was a difficult journey, but thanks to you all, who willingly followed me, we were able to return safely. Neither I nor His Majesty will ever forget your hard work. As it’s late, go rest now. After breakfast tomorrow, come up to where I’m staying.”

The Peletta knights, who had kept a respectful distance due to the box containing the Red Stone, saluted with emotional faces. The Cavalry members’ faces showed a mix of fatigue and pride.

Kishiar turned his head to look at the entrance of the quarters. His adjutant, Nathan Zuckerman, was already there. His gaze lingered on the small box in Kishiar’s hand, clearly guessing what it contained.

“Nathan. We need to return the Misty Wind Horse, call someone.”

“Understood.”

“And after that……”

Yuder left behind the brief conversation that Kishiar was having with his lieutenant and headed into the quarters with his fellow Cavalry members.

The inside of the quarters, now shrouded in darkness, was not too dark, thankfully, thanks to the regular placement of glowstones. During the day, these stones looked ordinary, but at night, they shone as if a lamp had been lit. They were so expensive that even a well-off household could only afford a few.

That such stones were generously embedded throughout the quarters was testament to how highly Kishiar regarded his Cavalry.

“I’m really tired from riding non-stop. I want to go wash up and sleep right away.”

“Me too. I hope they’ve cleaned while we were away.”

The Eldore siblings yawned and chatted quietly. Nearby, Kanna was discussing with Gakane how it still felt like a dream that their mission had ended successfully. Everyone was in a peaceful mood with their tension relieved, but only Yuder was engulfed in deep silence.

However, the other members did not find his introspective demeanor odd, as he had often been lost in thought before. They well knew the remarkable things he had accomplished during this mission.

“Yuder, see you tomorrow.”

“Rest well, and don’t think too much.”

Yuder nodded at his colleagues’ greetings and entered his room. The room, designated for one person, was small, but it had everything he needed.

However, his gaze did not linger on the cleanly swept room, even though it had been cleaned in his absence. No sooner had Yuder placed his bag down and sat on the bed, than he rolled up his sleeve to inspect his hand.

‘Still the same.’

The purple spot, which had not completely disappeared even after receiving Kishiar’s divine power healing, had neither grown nor shrunk during his journey here. But Yuder could not be reassured. Despite his continuous pondering on the way, he could not figure out why the spot hadn’t completely disappeared.

While returning, he had pulled his sleeve or crossed his arms to hide it from anyone’s view. If someone noticed the bruise-like spot that inexplicably grew or shrank, it would attract unnecessary attention.

It was an injury sustained during a crucial secret mission they had sworn not to mention. To avoid any unnecessary trouble, he thought it would be best to get a separate glove.

‘And I need to find out if there are similar curses or diseases like this spot, and if they can be cured.’

There had been many things he had planned to look into once he returned to the capital, but the spot had suddenly changed the priorities. He didn’t like it, but he had no choice. If his body wasn’t well, he wouldn’t be able to do anything.

Yuder finally stopped his worries after thinking up to this point. The accumulated fatigue from his long journey without proper rest surged in like a burst dam.

He barely managed to undress and prepare for bed before collapsing onto it. Sleep washed over him as if it had been waiting.

‘…I have no regrets. Just a little… disappointed.’

His voice held no strength, yet it sounded exceedingly elegant. Yuder blinked blankly. Through his blurred vision, he saw a figure.

A man sitting upright at a beautifully carved desk, wearing a faint smile. Under his faded golden hair, his darkened red eyes shimmered.

Yuder, upon seeing that smile, recognized who the man was, and when this scene took place.

The man was Kishiar La Orr, as he appeared on the day of his death at the Duke’s mansion in Peletta.

The desk in front of him was carved from a unique wood that only grew in his territory of Peletta, as was the chair.

The rugged yet stylish stone fireplace was completely empty and incredibly dark, as though it hadn't been used in a long time. The only thing in that space that hadn't lost its light was the divine sword, which lay atop a transparent scabbard on the fireplace.

Everything was as vivid as reality, but it was undoubtedly a dream. An old memory was unfolding once again, of its own accord. Even though he was aware of this, Yuder couldn't escape from the dream.

Was this a kind of punishment, to have to watch this nightmare until the end once it had begun? He wasn't pleased, but there was nothing he could do about it. Yuder decided to hope that it would end quickly. According to his memory, he was about to swing his hand, and everything would end.

But then,

"What are you saying?"

Yuder was taken aback by the sound of his own voice in the next moment.

What on earth was happening? He had no memory of giving such a response. Unaware of Yuder's confusion, Kishiar opened his mouth again.

"…I wonder where it all went wrong. Thinking about it, it seems like it was when we retrieved the Red Stone."

"…"

"Yes… That's right. It must have been then that everything started going wrong. But even knowing that, I couldn't stop it. Because I had no other choice."

In Yuder's memory, Kishiar hadn't said anything like that as he faced death. Amidst the immense confusion, Kishiar's words seemed to continue, teetering on the brink of stopping.

"If the injury I sustained from touching that stone hadn't shattered my vessel……"

"…"

Yuder awoke with a start, drenched in cold sweat.

The familiar ceiling of his quarters greeted him. He had finally woken from his dream. However, he wasn't able to calm down easily and spent quite some time panting heavily. It was no wonder why.

In the dream, Kishiar and Yuder had a conversation that was not in the original memory.

And it was precisely about the retrieval of the Red Stone.

It felt too real to be simply a dream mixed with delusions. It felt so real that it seemed as if his original memory was the one that was wrong.

Holding his throbbing head, Yuder recalled the words that Kishiar had said in the dream. He was saying that everything went wrong from the injury he got when retrieving the Red Stone.

That was something that hadn't happened in reality. Currently, the one injured by the red stone was Yuder. He let out a long sigh while looking at the unchanging spot on the back of his hand.

'I should consider the possibility that what I thought I remembered from that day might not be the complete memory.'

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Chapter 47

It was a story that didn't make sense in any conventional sense, but then again, being dead and returning to the past was already far removed from the realm of common sense.

Yuder pulled his hand away from his now calm head, the headache having subsided. Gradually, light was seeping in through the window. He was not likely to sleep anymore, so it seemed better to get washed early.

However, the moment he saw the small table set up in the room, the image of Kishiar from his dream unexpectedly resurfaced in his mind. Red eyes staring at him as he sat quietly at the desk.

Although he had claimed to be free of regret, the look in his eyes would have been impossible to believe for anyone who saw him.

What exactly was the emotion wavering in those eyes?

Had that really happened?

If something in his memory had been wrong up until now, where was the line between truth and lies?

Who dared to meddle with the memories of Yuder Aile? Yuder sighed as he wrestled with the unanswered question.

'Even if that memory was true… everything is different now.'

This time, Kishiar had not received any injuries during the operation to retrieve the Red Stone. Moreover, he had not used the divine sword when the invaders attacked. The fact that he was the master of the divine sword was still a secret known only to a few.

That was enough. So far, Yuder’s objectives were proceeding smoothly. With a firm clench of his fist, he decided to be satisfied with that fact for now.

His hand bore a small, purplish bruise.

Yesterday, Kishiar had told Eldore siblings, Gakane, Kanna, and Yuder to come to where he was staying the morning after breakfast.

However, Yuder couldn’t go down to the large dining hall where the Cavalry members gathered to eat. Thirty minutes before breakfast time began, someone knocked on his door.

It was Nathan Zuckerman, as always, his face calm.

“The Duke is asking for you.”

“…Now?”

“Yes.”

Yuder had assumed that Kishiar had summoned all the Cavalry members who had accompanied him on his mission because something urgent had come up.

But when he arrived, all he saw was Kishiar sitting leisurely alone in front of a table set for a simple meal. There were no other squad members in sight.

“You’re here. Sit down.”

Kishiar waved his hand in a light manner, holding a piece of bread cut into bite-size pieces, skewered with meat and vegetables. His demeanor was so casual that, if not for the setting, one might have mistaken it for a picnic.

Without realizing, Yuder turned his head to Nathan standing behind him. Nathan silently nodded. This meant that Kishiar had

indeed called for Yuder alone.

With a slight sense of apprehension, Yuder made his way towards Kishiar, surveying his surroundings. He could feel the heavy and tingling aura of the Red Stone pervading the entire space, but he couldn't see the box containing the stone. It must have been placed somewhere deep inside.

"Why have you called for me alone?"

"Let's eat first and then talk. You haven't had breakfast yet, have you?"

Yuder looked down at the dishes set before him. He was slightly taken aback, not being able to guess the purpose of the summons, but it was indeed something Kishiar would do.

'Anyway, once Kishiar said let's eat and talk, he'd keep his word.'

Yuder, sensing that further speech would yield no results, sat down before him.

"It's all simple food that you can eat. There's no need to mind your manners, so feel free to enjoy. Just so you know, I like the dish that's right in front of me."

The dish Kishiar indicated with a casual nod was a food skewered on a wooden stick. It was made by grinding various grains into dough, shaping it into a round form, and grilling it. Inside, it was filled with a variety of ingredients, making it easy to eat and tasty.

While waiting for Yuder, Kishiar had already eaten a few, as evidenced by the neatly stacked empty wooden skewers on his plate.

Yuder, looking at it, slowly picked up a skewer. As he awkwardly opened his mouth and bit into the well-grilled white lump, a wave of

heat spread in his mouth. The dish Yuder had chosen was filled with meat that had been stir-fried and seasoned with a savory sauce.

Despite his lack of appetite due to the nightmare he had the night before, he thought he could manage to eat a decent amount, as the food was not overwhelmingly flavored.

Quietly chewing his food, Yuder caught sight of the red eyes looking at him, smiling as if expecting something. He began to feel a strange sensation.

“Do you have something to say?”

“How’s the taste?”

“…”

Yuder maintained a brief silence. It was difficult to ascertain whether the question was genuinely asking for his opinion about the taste, or whether it was a probe for something else.

“It’s delicious…”

He responded in a mundane, safe manner. But it wasn’t sincere. Yuder had never really experienced a craving for food in his previous life.

To him, there was no significant difference between the soup he ate at the rundown inn when he first met Gakane and the beautifully skewered dish he was eating now. If there was a way to live without eating, he would have been the first to adopt it.

“No, not such an insincere answer.”

Kishiar shook his head.

“Being my assistant means you have to answer such questions sincerely. Now, answer again. How’s the taste?”

Yuder’s eyebrows twitched slightly.

‘Surely being an assistant doesn’t just involve answering questions about food?’

Was he just messing around? Anyway, if he wanted such a ‘sincere’ answer, he could give it. Yuder pieced together plausible words and spat them out in a lengthy response.

“Though simple in appearance, one can feel the care and time that went into making it. The flavor is mild and clean, making it suitable for a morning meal. I can’t express what a great honor it is to share such a meal with you, commander.”

There, was that alright? He’d done as requested, and he thought that would be enough, but Kishiar surprisingly shook his head again, a suppressed laugh shaking his shoulders.

“Disappointing. That’s not the answer I wanted. You still don’t get it?”

What was he supposed to understand from a question about taste? Yuder had never encountered such strange inquiries when he was Kishiar’s assistant.

Of course, Kishiar had been a very peculiar person then, too, but at least he hadn’t started off like this from day one of Yuder’s deputyship. Feeling slightly frustrated, Yuder opened his mouth.

“I’ve been indifferent to the taste of food since birth. There’s hardly any difference between gruel and gourmet cuisine on my tongue, so whatever I say, I fear it won’t satisfy you…”

“That’s it.”

“Pardon?”

“That honesty, that’s what I wanted.”

Yuder blankly stared at Kishiar, who was finally nodding with a satisfied expression.

“Do you really expect the one chewing food with the expression of eating sand to say it tastes good?”

“…”

“If it tastes bad, say it tastes bad; if you have no appetite, say so. That’s what I expect from my assistant.”

His voice, soft yet carrying an undeniable weight, resonated.

Only then did Yuder comprehend the true intent behind Kishiar’s persistent questioning. He didn’t want to hear a superficial, polite answer.

Kishiar had used the seemingly light and unexpected medium of a meal to break down the walls Yuder had erected and draw out his true feelings.

It was surprising that such a serious matter lay beneath a seemingly trivial question. His method of making one let down their guard for a moment was brilliant. It was baffling but at the same time genuinely admirable.

‘Even knowing that Kishiar uses such tactics, I let my guard down.’

Yuder blinked, then let out a small sigh.

“…In that case, I’ll stop eating now. I’m not hungry.”

“Hahaha! Do as you please. But at least have this juice. Nathan personally squeezed it for us.”

Kishiar laughed heartily, pointing at two glasses placed on one side of the table. It was juice made by grinding a mixture of vegetables and fruits.

Yuder looked at Nathan, who stood behind him with a stern expression, then lifted his glass and drained it in one gulp. The green juice seemed like it would taste very strange, but it was surprisingly sweet.

“You’re giving me a profound lesson on my first day as an assistant. Is this why you called me first?”

“Not at all. The real matter is this.”

Kishiar, who seemed to be preparing to finish his meal as well, elegantly wiped his mouth with a white cloth and extended his hand towards Nathan. Nathan approached the large desk, picked something up, and respectfully placed it on Kishiar’s hand.

It was a pair of black gloves.

Yuder’s expression changed in an instant.

“You seem surprised. The wound hasn’t healed yet, so it needs to be covered. These are special gloves with magic that sticks to the wearer’s skin and promotes healing. They won’t be damaged even if they get wet or bloody, so wear them without worry. There’s no need to thank me for a wound you got while protecting me.”

He had been thinking that he would need to get a glove anyway. It was fortunate that he didn’t have to go out and buy one, but that wasn’t why Yuder was surprised.

In his previous life, Kishiar often wore such gloves. Among the gloves he wore, there was definitely one that looked exactly like the one in front of him. The memories from that time, vivid as if he had forgotten them, suddenly came flooding back.

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Chapter 48

In the past, Yuder hadn’t paid much attention to Kishiar’s attire. There were occasionally members with unique abilities who wore odd clothes, so the fact that Kishiar often wore gloves wasn’t particularly unusual. However, on reflection, Yuder realized that since his return, Kishiar had never once worn gloves.

As soon as he realized this, naturally, a dream from the night before flashed through his mind.

Could the Kishiar of his previous life have truly suffered the same injury as Yuder during the Red Stone retrieval operation? Could that be why he always wore clothing that covered his body, even needing to wear gloves?

‘Come to think of it, whenever I had to meet Kishiar regularly, it was always in the darkness of the night.’

If he had been injured by the Red Stone, there would be a purplish bruise somewhere on his body. Yet, even Yuder, who might have seen Kishiar’s body more than anyone else except for his wet nurse, had never noticed it.

Kishiar always appeared out of the darkness and disappeared before Yuder awoke. The fact that Yuder had never found this odd was because, before Kishiar’s death, he had simply accepted it as a part of who Kishiar was, and after his death, he had tried to bury those memories in oblivion.

If he had realized something was amiss earlier, if he had taken an interest in Kishiar’s condition, could things have changed?

“I said I didn’t need any thanks, but isn’t that expression a bit much? You’re looking at me as if I’m a ghost.”

Kishiar, having noticed Yuder's expression, asked him with narrowed eyes. Only then did Yuder manage to calm his shock and complex thoughts, shaking his head.

"No, it's not that… Thank you."

"When someone asks, say it's a reward I gave you for accepting the position of aide."

If Kishiar said it was a reward he personally gave, even if Yuder wore it every day, people around him wouldn't find it strange. Besides, it was even enchanted to be helpful, so not wearing it would be the odd thing.

As Yuder nodded, Nathan, who had been standing behind them, quietly spoke up.

"It seems we will have visitors soon."

"Must be the other members. Nathan, clear away the remaining food."

Kishiar nonchalantly ordered Nathan, one of the continent's top Swordmasters, as if he were a servant. There was plenty to say about such treatment, but Nathan simply followed his orders as if it were the most natural thing.

While Nathan quickly stacked the plates and disappeared into the inner room, Yuder put on the gloves he had received from Kishiar.

They seemed to be made of leather on the outside, but once worn, they felt slick, like a slightly cold liquid adhering to his hand. Even when he clenched and unclenched his fist, there was none of the stiffness characteristic of leather.

"Just as I thought, they suit you well. My judgment was indeed correct."

Kishiar proudly complimented himself with a satisfied expression. Yuder didn’t respond. He felt no need to feign agreement with insincere politeness when honesty, however unpleasant, was preferred.

“By the way, did you confirm that none of the other members were injured?”

“Ah, yes. There were none.”

Throughout his return journey, Yuder had taken the time to ask his companions individually about any injuries. While some had minor scratches or muscle aches from climbing the mountain, no one else had sustained injuries like his own. It was a relief.

At the time of the explosion, Yuder had been closest to the Red Stone. It was just a few steps away, and he had thought he shielded everyone, but that small distance had created the current outcome.

‘Looking back, I should have put up the shield from the beginning.’

Regret filled his mouth with bitterness.

A while later, a knock on the door came along with the murmur of conversation from outside. Since Nathan hadn’t yet returned, Yuder got up to open the door himself.

“Commander, I apologize. I was about to bring Yuder with me, but he wasn’t in his room… Oh… Yuder!”

“Yuder, you were here? What happened?”

As soon as the door opened, Gakane, who had been apologizing loudly with his head bowed, was startled to see Yuder and shouted out in surprise. The other comrades were equally surprised.

Yuder gestured for them to come inside as he looked at their faces filled with betrayal and confusion.

“…Come in.”

Once everyone had settled into the long chairs, Kishiar greeted them as if he had been waiting.

“Did everyone have a restful night? I called Yuder here for a personal matter. I apologize for not informing you earlier.”

“Ah… I see.”

Gakane finally collected his surprised expression and calmed down. The Eldore siblings wore expressions of curiosity about what might have transpired between the two.

“You all look curious. Would you like to know what you’ll soon find out anyway?”

“Yes.”

Between the firm responses, Kishiar gave a soft smile.

“Today, you all will accompany me to the Imperial Palace with the Red Stone. We will show the Emperor the stone, and receive our reward for completing the mission. It’s a secret mission, so we can’t celebrate in front of many, but please be satisfied with meeting the Emperor directly and receiving an award. And while we’re there, I plan to appoint Yuder Aile as my Cavalry assistant.”

Such enormous news came out all at once, the members were momentarily speechless.

“The Imperial Palace?”

“We’re meeting the Emperor?”

“Yuder will be the Commander’s assistant?”

Each member exclaimed the most surprising fact to them, and they all looked at each other. The Imperial Palace of the Orr Empire was not a place anyone could visit. Even those born into nobility sometimes never set foot in it in their lifetime.

Moreover, the current Emperor had not shown his face at official banquets for several years, citing health reasons. It was only natural that everyone’s expressions froze in surprise at the news they’d be meeting such a person and receiving a reward directly from him.

Yuder had been in and out of the Imperial Palace countless times in his previous life, so he wasn’t surprised for that reason. But the fact that they were going to the Imperial Palace before he could convince Kishiar not to take the Red Stone to the Pearl Tower, and that he would directly meet the Emperor, whom he had never seen in his previous life, was quite shocking.

The Emperor, Kishiar’s only full sibling. In his previous life, he had died not long after this point in time, so Yuder expected his health to be extremely poor. But if he was well enough to give a commendation today, the known and actual conditions might be different.

‘Well, I have to tell Kishiar not to send the Red Stone to the Pearl Tower… but it’s going to be hard to find an opportunity like this. What to do?’

“If we’re leaving today… when are you planning to set off?”

“Right now.”

Kishiar’s answer to Yuder’s speculative question was clear cut.

“So, we don’t need to prepare anything?”

“What’s there to prepare? As long as you’re in your proper uniform, that’s sufficient.”

Kishiar, who appeared to find the question amusing, rose from his seat with a smile. The members followed suit, getting up with hesitant expressions.

Yuder scanned the faces of his comrades, his gaze stopping at Kanna, whose face was unusually pale.

‘…What’s going on?’

Her face was as white as a sheet, too pale for someone simply nervous about a visit to the Imperial Palace. Even a casual glance told him something was very wrong.

Yuder approached Kanna slowly, lowering his head after seeing Kishiar head towards the inner corridor to fetch the box containing the Red Stone.

“What’s the matter?”

“Ah!”

Kanna, looking as though she had been deliberately startled, stepped back a few paces, casting a glance at the others with sweat beading on her forehead.

“I’m sorry. I, I mean. That is…”

“Kanna?”

“Oh, well… I mean, if I go there… I mean…”

Kanna was trembling, stuttering, a far cry from her usual lively self. Her behavior was puzzling.

“What’s wrong, Kanna? Are you not feeling well?”

Upon hearing Hin's worried question, Kanna stepped even further back. Her shaking head revealed a mixture of confusion and fear.

"I mean… do I have to go there?"

"Where do you mean? The Imperial Palace?"

The mention of the Imperial Palace drained Kanna's face of all color. It was clear that she was reacting excessively to the word 'Imperial Palace'.

"Why all of a sudden?"

"No, it's not… I mean… I apologize for talking nonsense."

"It doesn't seem like nothing…"

Finn, standing next to Hinn, tilted his head in confusion. But Kanna closed her mouth. Their conversation was cut short by the return of Kishiar and Nathan from the inner corridor, Kishiar wearing a splendid cape.

"Alright, let's depart now. We'll be riding in a carriage this time, so it'll be comfortable."

Kishiar, holding the box containing the Red Stone, led the way with a calm demeanor, unaffected by the tingling sensation penetrating his skin from the energy of the stone. Nathan and the members hurried after him.

The carriage they would be riding was already waiting at the rarely used back gate. The carriage, large enough to comfortably hold seven people, was emblazoned with the emblem of the Imperial Palace. Its opulence, including the lavish use of gold, was overwhelming.

Even the eight horses pulling the carriage had been replaced with Misty Wind Horse, possibly for fear that ordinary horses couldn't withstand the energy of the Red Stone. This sight drew spontaneous gasps from the members.

"Incredible…"

"Nathan, I'm counting on you to handle the coachman's role."

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Chapter 49

Kishiar gave Nathan a light command and stepped briskly into the open carriage door. Looking at the large door which allowed the tall Kishiar to enter without bending his body even slightly, Gakane swallowed his saliva.

“Is it really true that the imperial carriage has been designed by grand mages to prevent even the slightest jolt?”

“We’ll know when we get in.”

Yuder swallowed his affirmation silently and replied just so.

Kanna did not marvel at the royal carriage like the others. After getting on, rather than being surprised at the smooth ride, she was constantly fidgeting as if there were thorns beneath her buttocks.

Her gaze intermittently turned to the window, swirling with unfathomable thoughts.

Why would she, a commoner, be so anxious upon hearing that she was going to the palace?

Yuder kept his gaze on Kanna, perplexed. Yet, Kanna seemed not to feel his intense gaze, her mind continuously elsewhere.

‘The Red Stone issue is a problem, but something’s off with Kanna too. If she stays like this even after we arrive, I’ll need to keep an eye on her.’

—

The Imperial Palace of the Orr Empire, La Luma Palace, was situated in the deepest part of the capital. Built in an era when the

relics of ancient times had not yet disappeared, the palace had maintained its unique beauty for a thousand years and enjoyed a special reputation.

Poets praised it as the most sacred paradise in the world, and everyone wished to see the Sun Palace spire, said to bear the touch of extinct races, at least once from afar.

“I can’t believe I’m crossing all seven walls of Luma.”

Hearing Gakane’s trembling voice, Yuder offered a faint smile. He had had the same thoughts on his first visit to the palace.

Even a commoner living deep in the mountains knew the tales of the heroes who aided the founding emperor of the empire, and the legend of the wicked black mage Modal.

Among these tales was the story of the Archmage Luma, who helped the emperor and chose the place to build the new palace, constructing seven walls to protect it.

The Archmage surrounded the palace with seven walls, each infused with different magic and made of materials possessing seven different powers. To reach the Sun Palace at the center, one had to pass through all these walls.

There was a significant distance between each wall, so those staying at the palace remained in specific sections within the walls, according to their purpose, status, or profession.

What people generally thought of as the capital was actually the area within the outermost seventh wall, where commoners or middle-class individuals resided.

It was a matter of course that the quarters of the Imperial Knights, where the cavalry barracks were located, had been there since

ancient times. It was the duty of the Imperial Knights to guard against external invasions from the outermost edge of the palace.

Unlike the seven walls, which were raised high like typical city walls, the walls from the sixth inward greeted visitors with some rather unconventional sights. Yuder casually observed the swiftly changing scenes beyond the carriage window.

Tall white trees growing in regular intervals, twelve fountains each bearing the sculpted figure of a sage, statues of seven knights holding a large window and riding horses, and the sweet and special scent of flowers that, while invisible, seeped into every corner, uplifting the mood….

All of it was the walls that divided the districts, they were living legends.

The carriage occasionally halted in front of the soldiers guarding the district boundaries, only to speed off again. The carriage, bearing the imperial seal, was in itself an absolute pass.

“We’ve passed through three walls. We should be at our destination soon.”

Kishiar, who had been sitting quietly with his arms folded, murmured as he casually glanced outside the window.

“The more I visit this place, the more I pity the Archmage Luma. Despite the trouble of creating seven walls, humans still conduct their own inspections before them. What a pointless effort. Don’t you think so?”

It seemed like a joke, but on the other hand, it was a statement that was difficult to laugh at. It was a daring remark, especially for Kishiar, who was born and raised in the imperial palace.

However, Kishiar’s eyes were languid, as if they held no intention. No one could decipher the sincerity hidden in his smile.

“We have arrived.”

A while later, the carriage came to a smooth stop. A small window connected to the driver’s seat opened, and Nathan’s voice was heard in brief.

The Cavalry members looked at the slowly opening door with tense faces. Kishiar, who was holding a box with the Red Stone in one hand, opened his mouth leisurely as if to reassure them.

“Don’t be tense. Hardly anyone knows we are coming today. Our meeting with His Majesty will only be brief. After that, I will be the only one left to have a private audience with His Majesty. Follow Adjutant Nathan and wait. Everything will be over then.”

“Yes.”

It is customary that the highest-ranking person gets off last when alighting from a carriage. The Cavalry members got off the carriage one by one, leaving Kishiar, who had been sitting inside. When it was Yuder’s turn, he paused instead of immediately getting off.

He had cleverly wasted time to let the other members get off first, leaving only himself and Kishiar inside the carriage.

The reason was simple. After considering it during the journey, the only moment he could express his opinion to Kishiar was now.

“Commander, is that box to be delivered to the palace today?”

As Yuder spoke quickly and quietly, Kishiar’s eyes narrowed as if interested.

“Why do you ask?”

“You tried to examine the stone with Kanna’s ability during the recovery operation.”

“That’s right. But it was impossible.”

“It’s too much of a waste to give up just because it was impossible at one attempt. Maybe… could you think about giving it a little more time?”

Yuder cautiously but clearly expressed his opinion. Kishiar, who had been examining Yuder’s face as if trying to understand his thoughts, tilted his head and gently raised the corner of his lips after a moment.

“Well… Do you think that with more time, it would become possible even though it was entirely impossible?”

Kishiar’s reaction wasn’t as bad as he thought. Judging by his words, it seemed that it hadn’t been decided from the start to send the stone to the Pearl Tower. If it had, he probably would have reacted much more negatively.

Then, there was only one thing left for him to show in the negotiation.

Confidence.

“I will make it possible.”

“Hmm, this is difficult. Such a proposal just before I have to present it to His Majesty. This is indeed, unexpected.”

Contrary to his words, Kishiar, who smiled while gently stroking the lower part of his lips, sank into his thoughts for a moment. Yuder was teetering on the edge of whether he should prepare a fallback plan in case Kishiar refused his proposal.

After a few seconds that felt like an eternity, Kishiar lifted his eyes again. Their gazes met.

“Originally, I planned to deliver the box today. His Majesty was very curious about it, and I thought I had examined it enough.”

“…”

“But, considering this is the first request from an assistant who I had to coax into service… I can’t help but accommodate. I can’t give you a lot of time, but since I’ve given my word, you must succeed.”

The nefarious plan that had been swirling in Yuder’s mind, contemplating even breaking into the imperial palace with a mask on to steal the box if necessary, evaporated instantly.

Looking at Kishiar, whose interest was hidden behind a lazy smile, Yuder blinked and slowly bowed his head.

“Thank you.”

“What for? It’s just this much. I’m a man who keeps his word. Aren’t you glad you accepted my offer?”

Without answering his question, Yuder quickly descended from the carriage, feeling a great weight lift off his shoulders. Following him, Kishiar elegantly stepped down onto the ground.

The place they arrived at was the dazzlingly bright palace. Despite reflecting only the sunlight and devoid of any grand adornments, it was a place that made those standing before it seem tiny. Even the imperial carriage, grand as it was, lost its glow before the mystical majesty of the palace.

The palace, with its unique beauty as if the greatest painter had drawn it on white paper using only bold lines, was the Sun Palace where the emperor resided.

Yuder quietly gazed up at the palace he had visited countless times in his previous life. Whenever the emperor called, Yuder had to come here, regardless of where he was or what he was doing.

He knew a considerable number of the countless secret passages hidden in this mysterious palace and remembered what was where like the back of his hand.

He had never wanted to return here at the moment of his beheading, but fate had quickly brought him back to this place. It was strange.

“Your Highness. I have been waiting for you.”

An elderly man who had walked out from the inner court bowed deeply in greeting. Though his hair was as white as snow, his back was still straight, and his eyes sharp.

‘He’s more capable than he appears.’

Yuder inwardly admired the old man’s ability to greet Kishiar, who was holding the box with the Red Stone, without showing a pained expression despite their surprisingly close proximity.

Like most palace servants, he wore a belt tied with a special knot around his waist.

The color of the belt and the number of knots gave a rough idea of one’s rank. The old man’s belt was a deep sea blue with five knots. Yuder’s eyes narrowed slightly at the sight of the golden tassel hanging from the end of the belt.

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Chapter 50

The blue belt signified the individual who served the Emperor directly, and the five knots represented over fifty years of service in the palace. The golden tassel symbolized the most brilliantly shining sun, a privilege only the head of the Emperor’s attendants held.

Yuder had no memory of seeing him in his previous life. The man seemed to have vanished with the death of the current Emperor.

“His Majesty is waiting for you in the Second Palace. Please follow me.”

“I’m here today not as the Duke of Peletta but as the Commander of the Cavalry. I’d appreciate it if you could address me accordingly.”

“Ah, indeed. This old man’s memory fell short.”

The head attendant seemed quite familiar with Kishiar. Yuder didn’t miss the swift but careful glance he cast over the Cavalry members.

“…”

The Cavalry members hardly dared to breathe as they passed through the long corridor and the garden. Among them, Kanna was by far the most nervous.

Yuder saw that her habit of bowing her head and walking excessively low was a continuation of the peculiar behavior she had displayed before they arrived here.

She seemed to want to hide her appearance from the gaze of others. He was curious about the reason, but in this quiet situation, he regretted that he couldn’t strike up a conversation.

The head attendant confidently traversed the third corridor and walked through the garden. Since he mentioned the Second Palace, they would have to cross a few more corridors. Yet, despite walking for so long within the palace, there was hardly any sign of people in the Sun Palace.

In his memories of a previous life, the Sun Palace was always bustling with numerous attendants, visiting nobles for the imperial audience, and foreign diplomats. This tranquility felt odd to Yuder, but the head attendant and Kishiar seemed used to it.

‘Is the Sun Palace devoid of people due to the current Emperor’s decree?’

Just as he thought this, the head attendant suddenly halted.

“Someone is coming.”

Moments later, as he had said, they felt the presence of several people coming from beyond the pond on the right side of the garden. As soon as they spotted the head attendant, Kishiar, and the Cavalry members, they stopped in unison.

From the belts around their waists, they were attendants. However, the belts they wore were as deep a red as twilight. Yuder knew what that red color signified.

Red was the color of the Crown Prince, the future of the Empire.

And the current Crown Prince was none other than the Emperor, Katchian La Orr, whom Yuder would serve until his death in the future.

“I was taking a walk and thought I saw a familiar figure. It turns out Duke Peletta is visiting.”

The tall group of attendants parted on both sides, revealing a boy from within. His appearance bore an undeniable resemblance to the imperial bloodline, much like Kishiar La Orr.

The beautiful golden hair blessed by the Sun God, red pupils, and outstanding looks, though still youthful, were unmistakably traits of the imperial family.

Although he appeared much smaller and younger than when Yuder first saw him in his previous life, how could he ever forget that face?

Without realizing it, Yuder clenched his fist tightly. The sharp pain digging into his palm helped distinguish between the past and the present.

The boy before him was still the Crown Prince. Katchian La Orr didn’t even know who Yuder Aile was. At this moment, his gaze was solely on the head attendant and Kishiar.

Observing it, Yuder reiterated to himself several times.

Now was not the past. Many things had changed since then and would continue to change.

Preventing the Crown Prince, in a few years’ time, from calmly issuing an assassination order against Kishiar La Orr. That was the future he wanted to stop.

If he said he held no resentment against the Emperor before his execution, it would have been a lie. However, even such emotions eventually vanished. Yudrain Aile, the Commander of the Cavalry, didn’t have his regrets rooted in that.

He once again recalled the thoughts he had reflected upon with bitter self-deprecation moments before death, utterly exhausted. In them, there was no longing for revenge.

He hadn’t returned to the Cavalry for revenge.

Of course, there were no intentions of letting Katchian La Orr become Emperor as smoothly as before, given that he had to save Kishiar and also survive.

In his previous life, the person he had watched over was far from being an excellent ruler. But now wasn’t the time when he had accumulated enough power to intervene. The timing was too early.

Yuder opened his eyes that he had closed and looked forward. Coincidentally, the first thing he saw was the straight back of Kishiar La Orr. He stood leisurely, like a large tree casting a shadow over the members behind him.

Seeing just that, the emotions boiling within his chest began to slowly subside, and his usual composure returned. After a few deep breaths, he was able to observe the conversation between Prince Katchian and Kishiar with cool eyes.

“What a surprise. To meet Your Highness the Crown Prince here, it seems like it’s going to be a lucky day for me.”

As Kishiar responded with a leisurely smile, a grin also spread across the prince’s lips. If you judged by his face alone, he seemed genuinely pleased.

“Duke Peletta must be busy. I heard you have been even busier these days, but I’m glad to see you looking healthy today.”

“You’ve been concerned about my health? I’m honored.”

“But who are the strangers following you, Duke? I don’t recognize these faces.”

The prince’s gaze skimmed over the Cavalry members. During that brief moment when his gaze landed on Yuder’s face, Yuder

clenched his fist tightly then gradually released it.

“They are members of the Cavalry I created a while ago. They are talents who will become the power of our empire.”

“Oh? I’ve heard the story. Hearing the Duke say that, I suddenly have high expectations. I hope one day to see their skills firsthand.”

“Haha. You’ll certainly be surprised.”

While pleasant conversation was exchanged, the Cavalry members glanced at each other. After a few more words about the Cavalry, the Crown Prince finally got to the point.

“Actually, I felt a strange energy from afar, which led me here, and only after meeting you, Duke, did I understand its source. What exactly is inside that box that gives off such an impression that I should not approach it any further?”

His tone was smooth, but his intent was clear. Yuder glanced at the small box that Kishiar was holding.

Judging by his intuition, after observing Katchian La Orr for nearly ten years, the prince wasn’t asking because he didn’t know. He already knew what was inside. He simply wanted confirmation.

‘Coming to see for himself, even though he already knows, indicates he wanted to verify something. It might be nothing, but if not… it could be related to whoever was behind the targeting of Kishiar and the Red Stone.’

All the way to this place, Yuder had been pondering the identity of the intruders’ mastermind. There were countless possibilities.

Kings of other nations greedily eyeing the Red Stone, the Sun God’s church, which, although proclaiming this newfound power as a divine gift, might not be thrilled about the current situation, the Pearl

Tower mages who couldn’t resist their desire to study the stone, and many more were possible culprits.

And among them was Katchian La Orr, who in Yuder’s previous life had directly ordered the assassination of Kishiar La Orr. Knowing that the prince, who was about to become a power within the empire, had no reason to covet the stone in such a way, this possibility was low, but it was still a potential scenario that could not be completely dismissed.

Unaware of Yuder’s scrutiny, the prince merely smiled.

“I apologize, but it’s difficult for me to speak about it, as it pertains to a task His Majesty has assigned. I can’t disclose anything before reporting to him.”

Kishiar, too, was smiling. Unlike the prince, who appeared quite cold and fierce when not smiling, Kishiar maintained an inscrutable tranquility and leisureliness.

“Ah, if your visit is due to such pressing business, I can’t keep you any longer. Let’s have tea together some other time when we meet.”

With the Emperor invoked as an excuse, the prince immediately stepped back.

“I understand. Today’s weather is lovely, so I hope you continue to enjoy this beautiful scenery.”

From behind Kishiar, the Cavalry members also bowed in unison. But their uneven salutes, each different from the other’s, caused the prince’s attendants to frown. It was clear from a glance that they looked down upon the Cavalry members as uncouth individuals.

Yuder followed behind Kishiar for a while, then stealthily turned his head. He saw the retreating figure of the prince, disappearing

into the distance along with his attendants.

“Would you mind waiting here for a while? I need to report to His Majesty.”

Even after parting with the prince, the squad walked quite a distance across the palace. The building they arrived at was the Second Palace, located in the innermost part of a complex linked by corridors and gardens.

The Sun Palace was composed of seven buildings connected in a unique pattern. When inside, it felt peculiar, but it was said that from the sky, it resembled a constellation.

The reason the number attached to each palace seemed unrelated to its actual position was due to this design. The Second Palace, being the furthest from the entrance among the seven buildings, was extremely inconvenient to visit.

In his previous life, when Katchian La Orr was the Emperor, he barely used the Second Palace. Previous emperors only used it when they were old, tired, and wanted to cut off communication with the outside world.

The head attendant informed them that the current Emperor, Keilusa La Orr, was waiting for them there.

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Chapter 51

Inside the silent palace, the head attendant, who had stationed Kishiar and the Cavalry members outside the door, politely knocked before entering. This place was eerily quiet, void of even the typical sight of a guard knight.

Could this really be the residence of an emperor of an empire? A silent question sprouted in everyone's gaze.

'Considering Kishiar doesn't usually carry a servant around, having only Nathan Zuckerman by his side, it's possible there's something in common between the brothers.'

Yuder also made a plausible conjecture amidst the silence.

"His Majesty has granted an audience. Please come in."

Moments later, the door opened, and the head attendant reappeared. Kishiar strode into the room that the head attendant opened. The members all followed him, and only Nathan Zuckerman, who had been quietly following the group, naturally remained outside the door.

Walking just behind Kishiar, Yuder quickly surveyed the surroundings. The place seemed designed for maximum efficiency, allowing all work to be done within a single space.

Beneath a window pouring bright light, there was an office desk neatly arranged with pens of various types. Next to it, a stack of mixed scrolls and documents exuded a strong scent of dry paper.

Behind what appeared to be an arch-shaped partition installed to divide the space, a curtained bed was seen, and next to it, a table

with black tea giving off a unique aroma. It seemed a place where eating, sleeping, and working could all happen at once.

And the owner of the palace, the emperor, sat in a high-backed chair placed not anywhere special, but under the wall, ready to greet them.

“You have arrived. I sense an unusual energy, it might be best not to come any closer.”

Upon hearing the Emperor’s voice, Kishiar halted, and all the members simultaneously bowed their heads. The emperor coughed a few times before slowly continuing.

“Under normal circumstances, I would have received you at the seventh palace and honored you in the most glorious way, but I hope you understand that I had to see you here.”

“Being able to complete the mission you entrusted to us is honor enough.”

Kishiar elegantly replied, taking a knee and bowing his head. The cavalry members, who were utterly surprised by the unexpected scenery, quickly followed suit, kneeling.

“Good. Raise your heads.”

After a moment, the Emperor quietly commanded them to raise their heads.

Finally, Yuder got a good look at the Emperor’s face. He seemed less like a ruler and more like a scholar who had been immersed in research for a long time. His features bore a striking resemblance to Kishiar’s, but the atmosphere he exuded was entirely different.

While Kishiar was tall and solid, exuding an air of composure with his lazy smile, the emperor appeared sensitive, his thin figure hidden

behind glasses, his eyes tired, and not even a trace of a smile.

He certainly wasn't as radiant as Kishiar. Nevertheless, he didn't seem to be so sick as to be incapable of handling state affairs, as was publicly known.

But why? While observing him, Yuder felt a certain premonition from his tired appearance.

'Seems like I've seen a similar sight somewhere…'

Ah.

At that moment, the Emperor slightly turned his head to briefly survey Yuder's face. In an instant, Yuder understood the nature of the sensation he'd felt. It was the same feeling he'd had from Kishiar in the dream the previous night, and now, the Emperor bore the same aura.

His hair and eyes, once lustrous, now lacked their sheen. His face, as white as a bonfire on the verge of being extinguished, had lost all of its light, leaving only ashes behind.

For a fleeting moment, the Emperor looked eerily similar to the dream's version of Kishiar, who had lost all his brilliance and was standing on the precipice of death. Why was that?

The moment Yuder opened his mouth to voice this peculiar sensation, the Emperor slowly began to speak again.

"Merely by observing your aura, I can believe that beloved Duke Peletta has completed his task perfectly. I'm overjoyed to finally hold what I've long sought."

Even as he spoke of joy, there was no trace of amusement in the Emperor's eyes. It was questionable whether his smile wasn't entirely stolen by Kishiar, his brother.

After finishing his speech, the Emperor took a long breath and scrutinized the faces of the five Cavalry members.

“I’ve wanted to get my hands on it since it fell two years ago, but no one was successful. Court mages, the valiant knights of the imperial guard, even secretly hired mercenaries all failed. But only one person, Duke Peletta, was confident of success. That is, if he was provided assistance in assembling those awakened by the power of the Red Stone into a cavalry.”

“Why bring up such old stories?”

Kishiar chuckled lowly, pretending to chide the Emperor. But the Emperor ignored him and continued his tale.

“I didn’t believe it at first. But now, after two years, today, the Duke really brought it before me. You all must have contributed to this, no doubt.”

“We are humbled.”

On behalf of everyone, Gakane responded with a slightly trembling voice. He was genuinely moved by the situation.

“I do not forget those who have worked for me. I will grant each of you five the title of ‘Knight’, award ten high-grade magic stones of North Mountain, and establish a training ground for the Cavalry.”

Even those who were not knights could receive the title of ‘Knight’. The youngest court mages usually started from this title and gradually received higher ranks.

But to not only grant a last name to all the Cavalry members but also bestow titles upon those who brought the Red Stone, it was indeed an unprecedented honor.

Even Kanna, who had been so tense since arriving at the imperial palace that she hadn't been able to lift her head, couldn't hide her surprise at the moment.

"We are humbled!"

"Your Majesty, the reward you have given my subordinates is extremely generous. But you have forgotten the most important thing. Shouldn't you also give a reward to me, who took responsibility for the beginning and end of everything?"

Kishiar, who had been quietly listening, smoothly interrupted as soon as the awards were over. Even though they were brothers, it was audacious of him to speak so lightly to the Emperor.

The Cavalry members were worried that the Emperor might get angry, but that didn't happen. The Emperor, pushing his glasses, made of silver and lapis lazuli threads, up the bridge of his nose, only slightly furrowed his brow as he looked at the smiling duke.

"Duke Peletta, you have already received much help from me over the past two years. Isn't that enough?"

"It is not enough. Did you not hear the report of over ten unidentified Awakened beasts storming into my residence? The report that the Red Stone had exploded?"

"…"

"I risked my life to bring this here. So, give me more."

Gakane swallowed hard at the audacious tone. The Eldore siblings subtly sent looks of admiration. Kanna, tense, bowed her head, and Yuder quietly observed Kishiar's bewitching smile.

The Emperor, who had been glaring at Kishiar, sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. Fatigue had further accumulated on

his face.

“Very well. Tell me what you want so badly that you’re begging so shamelessly.”

“I want time.”

“Time?”

The Emperor questioned back, puzzled.

“Yes. I want to examine this further.”

Yuder’s heart beat rapidly for a moment. Kishiar maintained the most composed expression, looking only straight ahead. The Emperor opened his mouth, indicating his incomprehension.

“Haven’t you already observed it more closely than anyone else during the recovery mission? Your task was to retrieve it, not to investigate it. Such a task should be given to the mages. It’s too risky to entrust it to someone who has never done such work.”

“Oh, Your Majesty. I thought you had read all of my report from last night, but it seems you haven’t finished it yet. Do you really think those who can’t even approach this box properly can investigate it well? Truly?”

Kishiar chuckled softly, provocatively retorting.

“It’s the same as when you entrusted me with the recovery mission. Ultimately, the only ones who can truly perceive the power it holds are those Awakened by its power. The Cavalry has many with unique abilities, certainly they’ll yield far more meaningful results than the avaricious mages. I guarantee it.”

“…”

His flowing, unyielding argument had taken the breath away from the listeners. It felt as if anyone who didn't believe his confident proposition would be the fool.

"…And if something dangerous happens during the investigation, what then?"

"If that happens, which it won't, I will take full responsibility."

"Even if you have to give up your position as the commander?"

At the Emperor's slow question, the breath of the Cavalry members hitched. Even the abundant sunlight pouring in through the large windows seemed to freeze in that moment.

Yuder also furrowed his brow, not having expected the Emperor to go so far. He had assumed that as his only sibling, he would receive some leniency, but that wasn't the case. The Emperor was a much tougher opponent than he'd thought.

But Kishiar alone burst into laughter as if the Emperor had just made a humorous jest.

"Are you that worried about me? I hardly know what to do with such concern at my age."

Concern? It sounded more like a threat to everyone. The same thought flickered and passed through everyone's minds in that moment.

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Chapter 52

“Duke of Peletta, this is no joke. Answer my question.”

“Very well. If something unsavory occurs while my Cavalry and I are investigating, I will take responsibility and step down from my position as Commander. Does that sound acceptable?”

His response was straightforward, but it only served to harden the Emperor’s already grim expression. He stared at Kishiar for a long moment before letting out a deep sigh. That sigh bore down heavily on the shoulders of the Cavalry members, like a weighty burden.

“You have ten days.”

“That’s not enough time. If you’re granting a favor, please extend it a bit more.”

The Emperor’s brows furrowed as if looking at a disobedient child. Yuder thought that Kishiar’s audacity had finally tested the Emperor’s patience, but he remained silent before speaking again.

“One month. Not a day more.”

Only then did Kishiar turn to look at his men. It was a casual gesture, as if he wanted to gauge their reaction. His gaze met Yuder’s, and his expression subtly changed.

Is this acceptable? His eyes seemed to ask. Yuder gave a tiny nod. Kishiar promptly straightened up and bowed.

“Your Majesty, I appreciate your understanding.”

After smoothly ending the conversation, Kishiar rose from his place. The Cavalry members quickly followed suit, straightening their bent backs and legs.

“You may now leave. I have a few matters to discuss privately with His Majesty.”

Kishiar’s words were not surprising as they had been briefed before they arrived. The men did not panic and immediately bowed before the Emperor and withdrew.

“Follow me.”

As soon as they left the Emperor’s presence, Nathan, with his stolid expression, raised his hand to call them. Yuder and the other men quietly followed.

“Are we returning to the carriage to wait for the Commander now?”

After they had moved a considerable distance and were about to exit the seventh palace, Hinn finally decided it was safe to voice her curiosity and asked Nathan.

“We will return to the carriage, but we won’t wait for the Commander there.”

“Then where?”

“We’re heading to the Black Pigeon in the Second Wall.”

Nathan’s response was concise and calm.

“The Black Pigeon?”

“What’s that?”

“Do you remember going to the Blue Crown when you registered for the Cavalry test? It’s similar but higher up. It’s where all the affairs of the nation are processed.”

In response to the curious Eldore siblings, Gakane kindly answered. True to his word, the Black Pigeon was one of the core institutions that upheld the Orr Empire. It handled administration and diplomacy, as well as all other minor affairs that needed to be dealt with in the palace.

Yuder surmised that Nathan was heading there because it was probably related to the palace’s internal affairs, which dealt with the running of the imperial household.

‘The Emperor’s order will require administrative work, so the sooner, the better.’

“I see. Why is it named that way?”

“Hmm, I’m not sure about that…..”

Gakane scratched his head and flashed an embarrassed smile. Just as Nathan, who probably knew the answer, was about to reply with an indifferent face, someone unexpectedly chimed in.

“…It’s because they’re constantly sending and receiving messages, working without rest. The name is an old joke that the pigeons worked so much, they didn’t even have time to clean themselves, so they became black with dirt.”

“Kanna?”

Gakane and the Eldore siblings turned in surprise. Kanna, who had been following silently with her head bowed until now, had spoken for the first time.

“How did you know that?”

“A long time ago, I heard it somewhere.”

Kanna’s response was soft and vague. Gakane and the Eldore siblings seemed to accept her answer, but Nathan closed his mouth with a peculiar expression. Yuder, too, narrowed his eyes.

‘She heard it somewhere…’

Even if he had responded, his answer would probably have been just as evasive.

However, the reason Yuder knew the answer was because he had worked and lingered in the palace in his previous life, gaining all sorts of information. A commoner, growing up normally without a family name, wouldn’t have known it even by chance.

Rumors associated with the name of the Blue Crown official could be picked up by the commoners living nearby. But the Black Pigeon official was different.

Even Gakane, who had grown up in a reputable family, was unaware of such minor and meaningless information. What was Kanna doing knowing it? What was he supposed to think?

Only then did Yuder realize that he knew absolutely nothing about Kanna’s family circumstances or personal information. Thanks to his memories from his previous life, he knew at least a little about the information of the other Cavalry members, but Kanna was a person he met for the first time in this life. Unlike Gakane, she did not freely discuss her own information.

He had thought her a sociable person who got along easily with any colleague, but it was surprising to realize that she had this secretive side. If even Yuder was surprised, how had the others felt?

‘The most likely possibilities are… she was related to someone working in the palace, or she hid her identity. It must be one of the

two.’

The latter was less likely. Before the last name bestowment ceremony, Kisihar would have thoroughly checked the identity of each Cavalry member to be bestowed upon.

Kisihar La Orr, who seemed to be a carefree person who only knew how to laugh on the outside, was actually more meticulous and careful in his work than anyone else.

It was his nature to investigate again before the bestowment ceremony, even if it was a matter that had already been investigated when accepting them into the Cavalry. So if he had investigated Kanna and concluded she was a commoner, there was no need to doubt that.

Therefore, Yuder decided to put more weight on the possibility of the former.

‘Those who work within the palace, or who have enough access to know the detailed internal affairs, are all nobles. But in the case of the Black Pigeon official, there are also middle-ranking managers and deputies who are chosen for their competence.’

In a few years, the Awakeners would break into key positions and receive titles, changing the situation, but so far, that was the structure.

So if Kanna was related to one of them, the likelihood was high that she was among those of the suspected status.

‘It might be a completely different third possibility… Whatever the situation, I hope it’s not a big problem.’

Yuder’s gaze turned to Kanna, who wore a dark expression. Nathan, who had been leading them silently and skillfully crossing

the paths between palaces, stopped at that moment and raised a hand.

“We are nearing the boundary of the wall. I will represent us during the inspection, so all you need to do is stay quiet behind me.”

As they had been riding the imperial carriage until now and hadn’t had to face an inspection directly, a slight tension swept over the faces of the members. As Nathan had said, the inspection post was soon revealed.

Inside the first wall, where only the imperial family resided in the palace, it was extremely quiet, with hardly anyone wishing to come or go. The expressions of the knights guarding the checkpoint were utterly relaxed.

“I’d like to head towards the second wall.”

“What is your name?”

“I am Nathan Zuckerman, an adjutant of Duke Peletta.”

The knights’ gaze shifted from Nathan, who was clad in armor adorned with the duke’s family crest, towards the Cavalry members wearing identical black uniforms. They merely glanced at the Cavalry members, not bothering to ask for their names.

“Understood. Please pass through.”

The members of the Cavalry were surprised at how easily they were granted passage. Yuder realized from the knights’ glances that they had assumed the Cavalry members were new recruits brought along by Nathan, but he decided to say nothing.

After all, Nathan had probably anticipated this and had offered to undergo the checkpoint procedures first. Being mistaken was actually beneficial for them as it expedited the checkpoint process.

Nathan courteously bowed his head in a gesture of acknowledgment before striding past the checkpoint without hesitation.

As soon as they passed through the checkpoint, the path widened dramatically, and the number of people passing by exploded. Huge buildings of various architectural styles were revealed.

The empire's court, built immediately after the founding of the empire, was clean and majestic with a single floor, while the new building of the Palace Magic Corps boasted a dizzying height of over ten floors. They were side by side, forming a harmonious blend that was typical of the second wall district.

'An area where all the institutions representing the empire gather…'

Yuder murmured the nickname of the area within the second wall as he looked around.

'It's been a while. With time, the Cavalry headquarters will appear among them.'

He turned his head towards the location where the Cavalry headquarters had been in his memory. Now, it was just an inconspicuous small auxiliary palace. In his previous life, that palace had been expanded and increased in floors to become the Cavalry headquarters.

The headquarters managed the operations of the Cavalry branches scattered throughout the empire and took on missions requiring coordination with other institutions. Yuder's official office had also been located there.

"Have we already crossed the wall?"

“I didn’t see anything, how did that happen?”

Eldore siblings, who were distracted by the surrounding scenery, belatedly realized that they had fully entered the second district and were taken aback. Nathan, who had been walking silently, seemed to think he should answer their question, so he slightly slowed his pace and opened his mouth.

“We have already crossed the wall.”

“When?”

“Just after we passed the checkpoint. The first wall is said to be in the form of a road paved with special magical stones, forming a circle and covering the entire area. They built a garden over it to deliberately conceal it, so it’s natural that you wouldn’t have noticed its existence.”

“Ah…”

Only then did the Eldore siblings’ expressions change, as if they had just remembered that the garden around the Sun Palace had been unusually long. Gakane, who had been quietly listening, also seemed excited by this new information, his cheeks flushing slightly.

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Chapter 53

“If passing through is this simple, anyone could infiltrate the First Wall. Isn’t His Majesty too exposed to danger?”

“No, that’s not the case. The First Wall is more secure against outside intrusion than any other.”

“How so?”

“Well…”

Nathan was about to answer when he closed his mouth, his gaze drawn to the massive gate visible in the near distance.

“We’ve arrived at the Black Pigeon. You’ll gradually learn more about the walls as you accumulate experience.”

The Black Pigeon was one of the more spacious institutions within the second district. Numerous visitors and officials scurried between the complex of buildings, and messenger pigeons, each with a small tube attached to its leg, flitted ceaselessly between the open windows and rooftops.

While they weren’t black pigeons, as the name suggested, the constant movement of the messenger pigeons gave a clear hint to the origin of the name.

Nathan exchanged a few words with the guard at the entrance before he returned.

“We need to head to the Inner Palace, which manages the affairs of the Imperial Palace. Shall we?”

As Yuder had suspected, Nathan seemed to have come with the intention of delivering the Emperor's directive and receiving any necessary replies. The Inner Palace was one of the nearest buildings, so they were almost there.

"Wait, just a moment. Sir Nathan!"

Just as they were about to follow Nathan, Kanna suddenly raised her voice from behind. She stood rooted to the spot, stubbornly lowering her head as she continued to speak.

"I feel… my physical condition has suddenly worsened. If it's alright, could I rest here for a while? It's not necessary for all of us to go there, right?"

Kanna's pale face looked truly sickly, but Yuder didn't believe her. Given her peculiar behavior since before they arrived at the Imperial Palace, her words were almost certainly a lie. Nathan also seemed to think the same, tilting his head with a calm expression.

"…It might be dangerous to stay here alone."

"No, it won't be dangerous. We're in second district, who would harm me here? I just need to sit on that bench over there for a moment, and I should be fine. Still… is that not okay?"

Cold sweat glistened on Kanna's face as she shook her head. Nathan remained silent in response, seemingly pondering whether to directly ask Kanna about the reason for her strange behavior.

'He must be quite troubled about how to handle a newcomer from a different department.'

Nathan was merely an adjutant of Duke Peletta, strictly speaking, not a member of the Cavalry. Dealing with people outside of one's own department was always a tricky task, and Kanna was even a newcomer. It was quite reasonable that he would be unsure about

how to address someone who might not even know the palace's rules.

'Besides, he can't afford to waste much time considering we have a place to visit immediately.'

Having thought this far, Yuder quickly came to a conclusion.

'It seems I should stay back.'

The Nathan that Yuder remembered was not particularly eloquent. Yuder was no different, but he had a better rapport with Kanna, thus he was less likely to upset her.

The reason was unknown, but seeing Kanna reluctant to go into the inner palace suggested that the cause of the problem might lie there. Therefore, it seemed much better for him to stay and converse with her, attempting to uncover the cause of her unusual behavior.

"I'll stay here with Kanna. Wouldn't that be acceptable?"

"…"

"No, no, it's fine Yuder! You don't need to…"

"Kanna, it's dangerous to leave an unwell comrade alone, no matter where. But if there are two of us, even Nathan would worry less."

Confronted with Yuder's meaningful gaze, Kanna fell silent.

Quick-witted as she was, she realized it was better to compromise and heed Yuder's words rather than persist stubbornly. However, seeing her reaction, other squad members stepped up as well.

"Hey, if we don't have to go, I'll stay here and protect Kanna too."

“Me too. If all we need to do is quietly wait here, right?”

“I want to help, too. I won’t move an inch from here.”

As the squad members quickly grew louder, Nathan furrowed his brow.

“Your camaraderie is impressive… but I can’t leave everyone here. If you really need to rest because you’re unwell, it would be best to ask the Commander’s assistant for help. I’ll leave it to you.”

Nathan was not a fool. He had roughly understood the hidden meaning in Yuder’s words and seemed to judge it better to leave Kanna with him.

If all the Cavalry stayed, a tense Kanna might not open up, but with only one person, her guard could be considerably lowered, especially if it was a familiar comrade.

Furthermore, by mentioning the role of the Commander’s assistant as a reason to leave Yuder alone, he had cut off any chance of rebuttal. There was likely no room for further discussion.

“I understand.”

As Yuder had predicted, the remaining three members, although disappointed, soon accepted the situation. Leaving words of care for Kanna, they followed Nathan inside.

“We’ll be back soon, so wait quietly over there!”

Yuder watched their retreating figures until they disappeared from sight, then turned his head. Kanna’s face was still full of anxiety. A brief glimpse of extreme fear could be felt in her eyes as she surveyed the passing people.

“Now that it’s just the two of us, can you tell me honestly what’s going on?”

“What? What are you talking about? Nothing’s wrong. I’m just not feeling well……”

Startled by Yuder’s words, Kanna lowered her head, but no one would believe her words. Yuder, looking at her in terror, sighed softly.

‘I wouldn’t have cared in the past.’

But now was different. He was the one who brought Kanna into the Cavalry. Therefore, he had to take responsibility for this unusual situation.

“Did you betray the Cavalry?”

Staring at her quietly, Yuder suddenly asked a question. Kanna’s eyes widened and her mouth dropped open.

“What?”

“Or did you kill an innocent person?”

“No!”

“Then there should be no problem for you, Kanna. The reason I remain here is to help you. Don’t tell me you think nobody noticed your peculiar behavior? The sooner you reveal it, the more time we’ll have to devise a plan. No matter what you say, I’m certain I won’t be surprised, so I wish you’d speak up.”

Kanna could only look at Yuder’s composed face, lost for words. From the moment Yuder hinted he’d stay with her, she’d anticipated he would say something, but she hadn’t expected to hear such words.

Yuder’s voice was always calm and cool, yet it held a peculiar power, as if imbued with strange magic. Upon hearing about going to the imperial palace, even the thoughts that had been tormenting her seemed ready to fly away momentarily.

But if there really had been no problem… such an event wouldn’t have occurred. Kanna bit her lip and lowered her head, temporarily wavering. She regained her composure just as she was about to open her mouth.

Her anxiety being discovered was embarrassing, but this wasn’t the sort of issue that could be improved by telling others.

“Really… it’s nothing… it’s not even something worth getting help for.”

‘Saying it’s not worth getting help for, it must be related to her personal affairs.’

Yuder could clearly see what was going through Kanna’s mind. If it had been like before, he would’ve had his underlings investigate the troubled individual and solve the problem, but now, being alone, he couldn’t. However, that didn’t mean there was nothing he could do.

“Who is it?”

“Huh?”

“Seeing as you don’t want to enter the palace, I guess the cause must be there. Who is it? Family? Relative? Friend?”

“What, what are you talking about, Yuder?”

“The most likely is family.”

The awkward smile that had been on Kanna's face vanished in an instant. Seeing her tightly clasp her pale hands and look lost, he knew he had hit the mark.

"I really don't know what you're trying to say. Stop talking nonsense. We told Sir Nathan we'd be waiting quietly on the bench. I, I'll sit."

"Kanna, a problem of a Cavalry member soon becomes a problem for the whole Cavalry. Sir Nathan has noticed the anomaly too, so it's only a matter of time before the Commander finds out and asks. Is that what you want?"

"…"

Kanna's steps faltered.

"We can end it quickly before the Commander finds out if you tell me now. Who is it in this place that's causing you to act like this?"

The two figures, noticeably dressed in black uniforms and raising their voices, attracted quite a bit of attention at the entrance of the Black Pigeon, where many people were coming and going. Of course, Yuder had intended for this to happen, though the response came quicker than expected.

"But I told you, it's nothing…!"

"Kanna?"

Hearing the sudden voice behind her, Kanna froze and clenched her jaw.

Yuder saw a middle-aged man and his servant standing suspiciously behind her. They had apparently just arrived, their carriage still behind them.

‘That’s him.’

In an instant, Yuder sensed a blood relation between the man and Kanna. The neatly groomed, slightly greying hair at the temples, the overall golden-brown locks identical to Kanna’s, and the highly similar facial features.

Crucially, the man was dressed in the uniform worn by the palace’s internal managers. He might have appeared gentle and elegant like a noble gentleman on the surface, but his eyes were as cold and arrogant as the winter wind, leaving an unfavorable impression.

“Kanna. I didn’t want to believe it, but it really is you. I can’t believe it.”

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Chapter 54

The man lifted his staff, embedded with a transparent magic stone, and moved slowly. With each soft sound of the staff's end meeting the ground, the color drained from Kanna's face.

Having ascertained this, Yuder reached for the hood hanging on Kanna's uniform and pulled it over her head. The moment the large hood concealed her face, Kanna gasped and swallowed.

"Don't say a word."

Yuder murmured softly, just loud enough for her to hear, then stepped forward towards the approaching man. This position naturally allowed him to shield Kanna behind him.

"What's going on here?"

"Who are you?"

Despite not knowing Yuder's affiliation or status, the man talked down to him. This meant he was looking at him in a belittling manner.

"I am Yuder Aile, affiliated with the Cavalry. And you are?"

"The Cavalry?"

The man tilted his head as if hearing the name for the first time, then let out a sound of realization a moment later.

"Ah, right. That group collected by His Grace, Duke Peletta…"

He left the rest unsaid, but the underlying tone was clearly negative. Yuder coldly looked at his face while subtly glancing down at his gloved hand.

‘He dares to ignore my question twice. In the past, I would have immediately forced him to his knees…’

Not that he couldn’t do it now. His hand itched to act, but the sound of shaky breaths from the hooded figure behind him held him back.

“There’s no need for pleasantries. The woman behind you is from my household. She committed a crime recently and ran away. We couldn’t find her until now. Step aside, so I can take her.”

Kanna’s trembling breaths abruptly stopped. Yuder briefly glanced back at her before returning his gaze to the man. Seeing Yuder’s nonchalant demeanor, the man commanded with a ruthless attitude once more.

“Didn’t you hear me? I said to step aside.”

“Heh, don’t you hear the Count’s words? Step aside!”

The servant standing next to the man also raised his voice. Nevertheless, Yuder remained stationary, not budging an inch.

“Are you deaf?”

“There’s no need for you to deal with these lowly beings yourself, Master. I will go…”

“Can you prove it?”

Finally, Yuder spoke.

“What?”

“How can you assure that the person behind me is the one you’ve been looking for?”

The moment Yuder’s deep, gloomy voice echoed through the air, everyone who had been watching felt a chilling intensity that made them shiver uncontrollably.

The man who introduced himself as Yuder Aile felt incongruous, like a single incorrectly placed piece in a perfect puzzle.

Two pitiless eyes under jet-black hair. The dark shadow cast beneath them was terrifying, as if merely meeting his gaze could steal away one’s soul. His ghostly pale face was equally unnerving.

Yet, this ominous and intense emotion made it impossible for anyone to look away from Yuder. No one had paid him any attention until now, but once recognized, everything about him appeared different.

Despite being right in front of them, he seemed like a shadow with no presence - appearing inconsequential yet, upon closer inspection, swallowing something terrifying like the darkness. Someone unconsciously swallowed their saliva.

Who on earth was this person? Many who hadn’t heard Yuder’s self-introduction simultaneously wondered.

“Sir…You cover her with a hat to hide her, and now you want to argue?”

The servant who had been confidently trying to drag Kanna from behind Yuder stuttered, barely managing a response. He didn’t even realize he had unconsciously used honorific language.

“You came out of nowhere and tried to take her without even confirming whether she’s the person you’re looking for. I didn’t know that a nobleman of the palace, like yourself, could just take anyone within the imperial palace without even revealing their name.”

Yuder didn’t show the slightest sign of fear or confusion. His chilly words caused a murmur to spread among the crowd.

“A nobleman from the palace?”

“A nobleman was trying to take someone? Who is it?”

Realizing that the attention of the crowd was focused on his master, the servant’s face turned pale.

“Ma… Master.”

Contempt and anger dwelled in the eyes of the Count, who resembled Kanna. If there had been no witnesses, he would have simply ignored the situation and done as he pleased. Unfortunately, this was in front of the Black Pigeon, one of the busiest places in District 2.

Once the attention had been drawn, he had to act considering his status and dignity.

“It seems there’s a misunderstanding. My servant must have misspoken, but he didn’t mean it. I am Hank Gallon, a Second Class Official of the palace.”

He was still condescending, but his tone had changed to a somewhat polite one, seemingly mindful of the onlookers. Yuder searched his memory for the name Gallon.

‘Gallon… Gallon. Right. He was a Count, that much is certain.’

To perform all sorts of secret missions close to the emperor, one had to be well aware of the political landscape both inside and outside the empire.

Remembering all the influential families in the empire was part of the necessary preparations for this. Yuder ransacked his memory

before speaking.

“So, you are Count Gallon.”

“I apologize for the sudden request, but that woman you saw earlier is undoubtedly a member of my household that I lost. If you allow me to confirm her face, it will quickly become clear whether my claim is correct.”

The only information about Count Gallon that remained in Yuder’s memory was that his family had lived quietly in the capital for a long time. Even if they had never been at the center of politics, they had neither taken the initiative to cause trouble. They seemed to have conducted themselves wisely.

Moreover, the palace was a place where only nobles with at least five generations of confirmed lineage could enter, as they directly handled imperial affairs. The power they could wield was limited, but it was good for elevating their honor.

‘He didn’t refer to her as a blood relative, but specifically as a member of his household. This means their relationship isn’t something that can be openly discussed.’

Considering Kanna’s reaction, it was clear that she had been acting strange since arriving here, perhaps fearing she would encounter this person. Yuder made up his mind and shook his head with a brazen expression.

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible.”

“Excuse me?”

“My companion comes from humble origins, and has just recently received a last name and recognition from His Majesty. Why are you so sure that she belongs to your family, Count? Our Cavalry verifies the identity of all its members, so it’s hard to believe there’s a

criminal among us. What is this crime you speak of in the first place?”

“…There’s no need for you to know.”

“Then naturally, I cannot hand over my companion. To doubt my companion is to doubt our Commander, Duke Peletta. …Did you come to us with some ulterior motive, Count?”

The people around them murmured as he let his words flow without hesitation. His argument seemed logical and hinted at various meanings.

Was the person implying that the Count had an ulterior motive, that this was a family issue, or was there a hidden intention against Duke Peletta? Or was this just some lustful scheme targeted at a woman who had caught his eye? Tension crept into the hand of the Count, clutching his cane, as curious eyes watched.

“How dare you question my master’s intentions!”

“You stand back.”

Count Gallon waved his servant away. But his seemingly gentle fa►►ade had long since hardened with anger.

“I tried to be respectful, but the way you speak is utterly vulgar. Does your audacity stem from the foolish belief that you’re backed by someone of great power?”

“Then why not answer my question? How could my companion behind me possibly be a criminal who has slipped through your fingers?”

“I’ve already told you. If you remove the hat and reveal the face, all will be clear.”

“Answer me first. How will I know the truth if you only speak after you’ve seen?”

The firm response from Yuder, hinting that he couldn’t trust the Count, drove Count Gallon to the brink of fury.

If it were up to him, he would have immediately summoned the palace knights to accomplish his goal. However, he had no choice but to hesitate as more and more eyes turned towards them.

“What did you say? A Count of the palace is eyeing a woman? Targeting someone who works here? How bold, under the watchful eye of the Sun Palace.”

“No, they’re from the Cavalry. You know, the place that Duke Peletta established a few months ago that caused quite a stir.”

“But why is someone from there in a confrontation with the Count?”

“I think he mentioned something about a family issue, but I don’t know the details.”

Every noble values their reputation and safety above all else. Even if the emperor’s health wasn’t the best, everything that happened within the palace would reach his ears. The four major ducal families were even more cautious.

The House of Count Gallon had managed to stay unscathed and cleverly navigate through the politics without allying with anyone. It wasn’t their intention to stir up unnecessary controversy and expose their weaknesses.

They couldn’t afford to reveal their family’s secrets to everyone over the pursuit of a young runaway girl.

In the end, Count Gallon decided to take a step back.

“You said you’re from the Cavalry, didn’t you? Today is not the day, but I will pay a visit there soon. Once I speak with Duke Peletta, the truth will be crystal clear.”

Even at the veiled threat, Yuder’s expression remained calm. His indifferent and arrogant demeanor, as if such words were no concern to him, made the Count grind his teeth in frustration.

“I’ll remember your name.”

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Chapter 55

“Do as you will.”

In his previous life, there were many who vowed to remember the name of Yuder. However, none among them could lay a finger on him.

“That… that man until the end… Master! Please wait!”

The servant cried out with a horrified face and then dashed after the Count, who had turned his body, stirring up a cold breeze, towards the palace interior. Those who had been spectating lost interest and dispersed when Yuder showed no reaction.

However, a few of them remained, observing Yuder and Kanna with interest. An old man who approached Yuder was among them.

“Do you know this? The Count Gallon’s family has held their title for seven generations, and their main house is within the fourth wall, powerful enough to be in the inner sector.”

Kanna, who was behind Yuder, stiffened. A weak-looking young man, seemingly accompanying the old man, was watching them, not knowing what to do. Yuder gazed at the old man’s face for a moment, then slowly smiled.

“And what does that have to do with me?”

“You’re not afraid of making a powerful enemy by hiding your comrade?”

“If I were to put it bluntly, I’d say it’s the other way around.”

“The other way around?”

The old man, his long white beard giving him an imposing air, evoked the image of a dignified noble family head in his traditional attire. Anyone else might have been intimidated by his presence, but there was no change in Yuder's expression.

"You see, he has made a formidable enemy in me."

"Ha! Such confidence. May I ask what gives you the nerve to say such a thing?"

Why wouldn't he? Yuder opened his mouth with a cool smile.

"Of course, it's the power I possess."

"…"

The old man's eyebrows twitched. A moment later, he burst into hearty laughter, full of admiration.

"Power that transcends status and influence! I'd like to witness this formidable power myself. I hope your words aren't empty promises."

After saying this, the old man patted Yuder's shoulder and headed towards the young man, who had been waiting anxiously.

"Master. You always say that watching a fight is the best, but why did you get involved here? I'm utterly embarrassed…! Do you realize how late we are? By now, everyone else would have gathered…!"

"You fool. What does it matter if I'm late? I've seen the most interesting thing here. How could I simply walk away from that?"

"But…!"

"Quiet, and lead the way, boy."

Yuder quietly watched the young man and the old man bicker and disappear, then turned his head. As if she had been waiting for this moment, Kanna spoke up.

“Yuder. Why did you do that?”

A small voice came from behind Yuder. Kanna was clutching his clothes tightly with her trembling hands. Yuder turned to face her.

“That’s why, isn’t it? The reason you didn’t want to come here.”

“Why would you do something like that? You have no idea how tenacious and terrifying that man is! How are we going to handle this…?”

Instead of an answer, a deep sense of despair returned. It was as good as any answer.

“I… I’ll speak to the Commander. I’ll tell him you’re not at fault, Yuder. And I can resign before he comes… Yes, that might work…”

“Resign?”

Yuder turned toward Kanna, who was making an absurd claim, and spoke firmly.

“Why are you trying to quit the squad?”

“But you heard him. He said he would come to the Cavalry…! Aren’t you worried?”

Kanna retorted, seemingly unable to understand.

“Didn’t you hear what the other person said earlier? About what kind of person Count Gallon is? He’s a terrifying person. Really, truly terrifying.”

Kanna’s fear of Count Gallon seemed to run quite deep. What had she experienced? Yuder lightly tapped on her trembling shoulder, redirecting her gaze back to him.

“It’s okay. If he doesn’t come, I’d be more disappointed. I introduced myself hoping for that.”

“What?”

“It doesn’t matter at all what power his family holds. All I’m curious about is your story. Kanna, what is your relationship with that family?”

“Right. I’m quite curious about that situation too. I wish you would tell us soon.”

A soft voice interrupted from behind Yuder. At that moment, Kanna retreated in surprise.

“Co-Commander?”

Yuder saw Kishiar, wearing a large purple robe typically worn by court mages, slowly emerging from the shade of the trees.

His striking appearance and outfit suited to conceal his white uniform were one thing, but the surprise was something else. Kanna mumbled with her mouth agape.

“When did you…? No, rather, why are you dressed like that…?”

“Haha. Don’t worry about it.”

“Have you finished your conversation with His Majesty? Where did you leave the box and the carriage?”

Kishiar shrugged with a smirk at Yuder’s sharp question, who, far from being surprised by his appearance, was rather unflustered.

“You’re never surprised, which makes things quite boring. The carriage is where it was left, and His Majesty is briefly examining the box. But more importantly, wouldn’t you like to discuss this interesting information about a squad member’s secret that even I was unaware of?”

Seeing Kishiar’s laughter, Kanna’s face turned pale again.

“I…I…”

“Hold on. If we talk here, we might draw attention. Come this way. There’s a perfect place to talk inside there.”

Kishiar leisurely led them and entered the Black Pigeon office through the main entrance. Given the large number of people coming and going, no one recognized or stopped them.

Kishiar, who was walking amidst the crowd, suddenly slipped into a very narrow space between two buildings.

From the outside, it seemed too narrow for anyone to pass, but as they followed him, a path wide enough for a person to walk appeared as if by magic. The narrow gap they’d seen was an illusion created by the overlapping building and shadows.

Upon exiting, surprisingly, a very small open space appeared.

“When buildings are continually constructed and inserted over a long period of time, occasionally unnoticed gaps like this are created. No one will come here, so feel free to talk.”

Even Yuder, who was quite familiar with the palace’s geography, had never seen this place. It was astonishing.

“How did you know about this place?”

“Forgot, did you? I was born and raised here. Exploring the palace was my favorite pastime as a child.”

The Imperial Palace extended to the Second Wall, but the palaces where the emperor and the imperial family resided were mostly within the First Wall. It was unthinkable that a young, noble prince would venture beyond the First Wall for exploration and play.

It was a staggering answer, but it seemed all the more surprising because it was plausible, considering it was Kishiar.

“I’m really sorry, Commander. I didn’t mean to cause any trouble for the Cavalry or you. I just… I needed a place to hide.”

In the quiet courtyard, Kanna finally removed her large hat with trembling hands and revealed her face. The first thing she did was to bow deeply in apology.

“A place to hide. From Gallon House?”

At Kishiar’s question, Kanna nodded difficultly.

“Yes. I don’t see any point in hiding anything anymore. As you’ve probably guessed, I lived in Gallon House. Count Hank Gallon would have been my… father, but I never called him that.”

Kanna’s story wasn’t too different from what Yuder had anticipated. She was born to a maid with whom Hank Gallon had spent a night. The Count did not give Kanna a name or a surname. It was a statement of his complete refusal to recognize her as his own flesh and blood.

Her mother, with a bit of money she received when expelled, rented a small house in the Seventh Wall and raised her daughter. However, three years ago, when her mother died of illness, Kanna had to return to her birth house, where she lived a life of contempt, treated not as a daughter but as a maid.

“I thought that kind of life was better than living alone. But… my thoughts changed after I awakened a year ago.”

Kanna’s ability was to read the information of objects. One day, while cleaning, she accidentally discovered the dark intentions of Count Hank through the objects she touched. He intended to hand her over to another noble, at any age.

That noble was known for his vicious and despicable personality, and even though Hank knew that Kanna would likely die if she was given to him, he didn’t care. The political gain he would receive by doing so was his priority.

The moment she read that terrifying intent, she shivered. From that moment, Kanna began to plan how to escape from the Count’s house.

“At first, I planned to flee to a foreign country. But then the Cavalry recruitment announcement came out… I decided to try out, and if I failed, I would change my plan and head abroad.”

But, to her surprise, Kanna passed. Thanks to Yuder’s advice.

“I knew the Count worked at the Imperial Palace, and I was scared that I might run into him if I went there. If I was found, he would definitely recognize me and try to take me away immediately. But… considering how things turned out, I think it would be better for me to resign before he comes looking for me in the Cavalry. …That’s all.”

After Kanna finished speaking, silence fell among the three.

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Chapter 56

Yuder recalled the moment he first met Kanna, seeing the bitterness in her expression.

When he first met her at the front of the Blue Crown for the Cavalry's entrance test, Yuder thought of her as a rigid and angry person. He simply thought that she was the type of person whose face would show such an expression when she was overly nervous, but that was not the case. After hearing her current story, he finally understood why her expression was so severe.

For Kanna, that moment was a once-in-a-lifetime choice and challenge.

After telling her entire story, Kanna's eyes conveyed more unease and sadness than the refreshing feeling of someone who had spilled her secrets. She bowed her head silently in front of Kishiar, like a criminal waiting for her punishment.

"What were you planning to do next if you left the Cavalry?"

Kishiar's first question was very succinct. Kanna blinked blankly, perhaps taken aback by his unexpected response, and finally opened her mouth.

"As I originally planned… I'm thinking about going abroad."

"With your abilities, it won't be easy to become a mercenary, will it?"

"I was thinking of joining a wandering theater troupe. I think I would do well as a fortune teller."

"I see. That would have been fine. You've thought hard about it."

“…Pardon?”

As Kanna asked with a puzzled face, Kishiar’s voice suddenly turned cold.

“But Kanna Wand, don’t you think the members who have known you will miss you a lot if you suddenly leave the troop?”

‘Kishiar La Orr, why does he keep saying such strange things?’

Kanna’s abilities were essential to investigate the Red Stone. Her abilities were much more promising than she thought.

How could a wandering theater troupe dare to compare with the safe and glorious Cavalry? Even if she really committed a crime and was dragged away, they had to stop it at all costs. Yuder was not pleased with what Kishiar was saying.

As Yuder’s eyes secretly sparkled, Kanna opened her mouth with a look of determination.

“If they miss me, I would be really grateful and sad. I was really happy while I was in the Cavalry, and it was fun to meet good colleagues. I owe a great debt to the Commander who accepted me and to Yuder, who helped me in many ways, which I can never repay. However, for that reason, I think it’s right for me to leave the troop for the Commander, Yuder, and my colleagues. If I have to be punished for lying about my background as an orphan with no family when I joined, I am willing to accept any punishment.”

Her eyes were filled with sadness, but her face was incredibly calm and dignified when she said it was right for her to leave.

“You are willing to accept any punishment?”

“Yes.”

“If you’re willing to accept it, there’s no need to refuse.”

“Commander.”

Yuder called Kishiar, frowning. However, the moment their eyes met when Kishiar turned his head to his call, Yuder realized that he had misunderstood something.

He didn’t realize it because his voice was so serious, but there was a mischievous glint in his red eyes that he was facing.

“My members are strange. I’ve worked so hard for two years to build the Cavalry, but the talented ones who have passed through numerous competitors all seem to have no attachment to the Cavalry.”

“…”

“I don’t know whether my eyes are strange, or the members are strange.”

Kanna, who had been hanging her head, slowly rolled her eyes upward, seeming perplexed by the odd remark. Kishiar looked down at her with languid eyes, a leisurely smile on his face, and opened his mouth.

“So, Kanna Wand. Your punishment is to become the Deputy Commander of Jung Division.”

“… Pardon?”

“To be frank, one who has not received the last name can’t be considered a family, so you didn’t tell a lie. Regardless of what Count Gallon says, you can’t leave the Cavalry. But you asked for the punishment yourself. You tried to leave the supposedly blissful Cavalrt so easily, so you have no choice but to work hard and pay for your sins.”

“But, but Commander. What does that mean? I…”

Kanna was about to retort with a startled expression, but Kishiar cut her off with a decisive wave of his hand.

“That’s the end of it. No more words are necessary. Go back.”

Yuder finally let out a sigh of relief. As he followed Kishiar, who turned without hesitation, Kanna shouted in confusion from behind.

“Commander. How did you understand my words just now? Me, a deputy, absolutely not. Yuder! Say something!”

“It’s better than being an assistant.”

“What?”

“What are you saying?” Kanna shouted, but Yuder did not answer.

He didn’t want to admit that he had spoken of leaving the division like Kanna, refused Kishiar’s offer, but ended up becoming the Commander’s assistant.

‘Well, that aside, appointing a deputy in Jung division wasn’t something I recall from my previous life.’

In Kishiar’s time as the Commander, he didn’t appoint a deputy in the Jung division, which had a critically low number of members. Later, when Yuder took over the position and the Jung division grew, a deputy position was added. However, he didn’t expect it to happen again now.

The reason Kishiar made Kanna the deputy of a division with only ten members was probably not because the role was genuinely needed.

It was more likely an act of consideration to lessen her burden and make her stay in the Cavalry more comfortable. But this again changed the future Yuder knew. It was a positive result.

“Yuder Aile.”

“Yes.”

“What were you planning to do with that power of yours when Count Gallon came to the Cavalry?”

While contemplating, Kishiar suddenly started talking. Yuder kept silent for a moment, then briefly glanced around to check where Kanna was. She was slowly following from quite a distance. It seemed safe enough to respond.

“I was planning… to give him a bit of a hand.”

“How much is ‘a bit’ in your terms?”

“Enough for rumors to circulate that anyone who messes with a member of the Cavalry won’t be able to leave in one piece.”

Hearing Yuder’s response, Kishiar tilted his head with a peculiar smile.

“Who do you think will clean up after that?”

“Didn’t you say you would take good care of your assistant, sir?”

He boldly retorted, implying that surely he couldn’t handle even that much. Laziness, like a well-fed beast, shimmered above Kishiar’s red eyes.

“That’s right. I did say that.”

The Cavalry needed a strong presence and reputation now more than ever. Even with all kinds of praise from the Emperor, it would

still only be known to those in the know.

To make the existence of the Cavalry widely known across the continent, it was necessary to create a few noisy episodes.

In his previous life, the event that had marked the beginning of that saga was when Kishiar announced he was the owner of the divine sword. However, in this life, that incident had not occurred. But what if an incident involving a malicious nobleman being soundly beaten and chased away by the Cavalry members trying to protect a comrade occurred?

Even if it couldn’t match the saga of the divine sword, the world would be profoundly shocked by the fact that commoners could dare to do such a thing to a nobleman and face no repercussions whatsoever.

‘And they would never forget the name of the Cavalry.’

It seemed that Kishiar, too, had already done that level of calculation, hence his amusement.

What would the nobleman’s pretentious face look like after experiencing a disgrace that would forever stain his history? Yuder felt a rare sense of satisfaction and silently curled up the corners of his mouth.

“Then, I take it you approve.”

“Don’t keep all the fun to yourself. Invite this onlooker too. Is there anything more entertaining than watching a fight?”

A fight to watch. Upon hearing those words, Yuder remembered the old man and the young man he had met earlier. He had recognized who the old man was, a man who loved to watch fights, the moment he saw him.

‘Thais Yulman, one of the elders of the Pearl Tower, an Archmage. I didn’t expect him to be visiting the imperial palace at this time.’

Unlike other mages who had been honored with the title of Archmage, Thais wasn’t proficient in attribute magic. He had gained his fame solely due to his diverse research results aimed at piercing the essence of the world through magic.

He had proven that air and magic were different, and he had researched the differences between materials created by magic and real nature.

Even though he couldn’t use attack magic, it was well-known that nobody was better than him when it came to breaking down magic.

Why would Thais Yulman, of all people, have come to the imperial palace? Moreover, why was he dressed like an ordinary noble old man instead of wearing the robe exclusive to mages of the Pearl Tower?

‘Well, considering his timing and his expertise, the conclusion is obvious.’

Simply put, he may have just wanted to visit quietly without revealing his identity and meet the court mages of the Orr Empire.

However, an Archmage who specializes in magic research appearing in the imperial palace as soon as the Red Stone was retrieved was a clear sign of his objective, wasn’t it?

Thais Yulman probably rushed here from the Pearl Tower the moment he heard the news of the successful retrieval of the Red Stone. He must have been unable to bear his desire to immediately take the stone and study it. His will could be considered the will of the entire Pearl Tower.

‘Kishiar must have secretly reported the retrieval to the Emperor alone, but for some reason, it feels like the news has already spread across the entire continent.’

In his previous life, when he investigated the Red Stone, he could not find out who had refined the stone in the Pearl Tower. The information within the Pearl Tower was top secret.

Moreover, by the time Yuder had started his investigation, several years had already passed since the collapse and ruin of the tower. Even whether Thais Yulman was dead or alive by then was unknown.

‘Thais Yulman… I’ll have to remember that.’

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Chapter 57

“…I’m glad that your taste aligns with mine. It makes me feel that the effort to bring you on as my assistant was worthwhile.”

“Pardon?”

Yuder was preoccupied with thoughts about Thais Yulman, and had missed Kishiar’s comment. He turned his head a little too late to ask again, only to find that Kishiar was also looking in his direction with a slight tilt of his head.

Their faces had stopped at a very close distance.

“…”

In that instant, Yuder’s gaze was seized by Kishiar’s face. Kishiar, too, blinked, staring back at Yuder.

After a short pause, it was Kishiar who first broke away from the gaze and flashed a smile.

“We almost bumped into each other.”

“Oh, yes.”

Yuder finally regained his senses and turned his head away.

“Did you fall for my face up close? You were looking rather passionately.”

The unfamiliar short pang Yuder had felt shattered instantly.

“No, that’s never happened.”

Despite his immediate, firm denial, Kishiar persisted as if he had a winning hand.

“You didn’t? Weren’t you just looking?”

“I never did.”

“I should have just bumped into you. It seemed like a perfect angle for a kiss.”

Yuder felt a sudden chill in his spine and inadvertently looked back again. Fortunately, Kanna seemed to still be following from a distance, seemingly engrossed in her own pleasant thoughts.

“Making such comments to anyone could lead to unnecessary misunderstandings. Please refrain. I am your assistant.”

What was the point of making such a joke to Yuder, who had yet to awaken his second gender?

Although he had accepted the position of assistant, there was clearly nothing more than that. The future would not be like the past.

“Anyone? That’s a bit hurtful. Are you ‘anyone’?”

Kishiar, who didn’t care about other people’s feelings, couldn’t suppress a small chuckle, shaking his shoulders as he slowed down and quietly fell behind Yuder. It seemed he just wanted to tease.

“Alright, I won’t do it anymore. Don’t purposely distance yourself. Weren’t we just happily discussing plans together?”

“….”

“Choosing you as my assistant seems like a good decision. I think we’ll make a great team, don’t you think?”

Kishiar had an extraordinary talent for expressing the same phrase in a strikingly different manner. As Yuder sighed lightly, Kishiar laughed once more.

Looking at his laughing face, Yuder thought about the indescribable feeling he had just experienced. It was a face he had seen countless times, in his previous life and in this one he had returned to.

But something was different this time.

Was it the man with such vibrant eyes? He had always thought of him as someone whose smile concealed a world-weary blade and suppressed fatigue, but Kishiar's face up close showed none of that.

It should be natural, given that he had returned to a past where nothing had happened yet, but this ordinary fact was shocking.

The image of Kishiar in his dream, who had joked with a lonely face, empty as if it had been hollowed out, reemerged. It seemed as if he had just seen what that Kishiar, who had been facing death, had lost.

Yuder instinctively raised his hand to his chest and pressed it lightly, then quickly pulled it away.

He still did not know how to express the feeling he had just experienced.

——

That day, Kanna shared her past with her comrades in the carriage, briefly but confidently. The members, who had been deeply worried about her, all felt a strong resentment towards Count Gallon. They comforted Kanna and pledged to keep everything she had shared a secret.

Kishiar returned holding the Red Stone in the box, just as he had when he first arrived at the imperial palace. The next day, he appointed deputy commanders and an assistant in front of all the members.

“Shin’s deputy commander, Ever Beck. Sul’s deputy commander, Steiber Rendley. Jung’s deputy commander, Kanna Wand. And the Cavalry assistant, Yuder Aile. These four people will divide the duties of the commander and help each other.”

Among the three deputy commanders, the only one who didn’t have a close relationship with Yuder was Steiber of Sul. However, Yuder already knew what kind of person he was through the memories of his previous life.

Steiber was the oldest among the current members. He was a simple bakery owner and the head of a household, who was over 40. He had exceptional ability to handle water and was well-liked.

In his previous life, Yuder had been the deputy commander of Sul, hence Steiber was a regular member without any special duties. However, the members of Sul respected Steiber more than Yuder.

Yuder thought that Steiber Rendley would make a good deputy commander, and he once again admired Kishiar’s insight. Kishiar seemed to know how the dynamics among the members flowed, and who stood out in what area, although it seemed like he didn’t.

With the exception of Ever from Shin, all the deputy commanders were different from the previous ones. It was a good start.

And quite swiftly, that afternoon, a carriage bearing the emblem of Count Gallon arrived in front of the Cavalry’s barracks within the grounds of the Imperial Knight’s quarters.

As he watched the arrogant nobleman and the soldiers he brought with him enter, Yuder grinned ominously along with Gakane

and the Eldore siblings.

The nobleman who had tried to sell off the unawakened Kanna from the Cavalry without even conducting a proper ceremony ended up in a terrible state just an hour later, which caused a huge shock within the capital.

The disgraced noble family, who had become a laughing stock, belatedly protested to Duke Peletta and the Emperor, but nobody listened to his complaint.

Are they supposed to believe and punish based on just one person's words about an event they didn't witness themselves? According to the complainer, dozens of robust soldiers couldn't handle just four Cavalry members. It was the complainer who had first declared he would attack and kill. Wasn't this a case of self-defense? If the opponent was a Swordmaster, could they have acted the same?

The written reprimand that the Emperor issued to the protesting nobleman served as an evaluation of the Cavalry members' skills that had been shrouded in mystery, and it was incessantly discussed among the people.

The nobles, who hadn't even known the name of the Cavalry until then, felt an unpleasant fear creeping up their spines for the first time.

The news spread rapidly beyond the capital to the empire, and eventually to the entire continent.

Everything was going exactly as Kishiar La Orr and Yuder had anticipated.

—

"Your Majesty. The Empress has come to visit."

The Emperor sat at his desk, rubbing his weary eyes, the paper he'd been grappling with for some time finally set aside. Through his spectacles, his fatigue-laden eyes concealed, he didn't feel like the Emperor of the immense Orr Empire that had spanned a millennium.

"Let her in."

The door promptly opened and a woman with pale blonde hair entered under the guide of the chief attendant. After surveying the room, littered with empty tea cups, papers, and books, she sighed heavily as if to signal her readiness to hear more, then approached the Emperor.

"Whilst I understand you can't leave this place, didn't I tell you to at least clean up more often?"

"You're nagging the moment you arrive?"

Despite his words, the Emperor's expression was incredibly gentle. A faint smile, one he wouldn't even show his brother Duke Peletta, rose to his face. Seeing this, the Empress moved behind him. The sight of the Emperor's thin frame, visible through his shirt, hurt her inside.

"I worry for you. You look even more ill than before."

"My face is the same as always."

"No, it's not. You really do look unwell. Have you been drinking the herbal medicine I sent?"

The Emperor, feeling the Empress's slender fingers on his shoulder, smiled quietly. Even the times of excruciating pain that always ate away at his body, and the unbearable humiliation, felt like nothing in that moment.

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I drink what you sent? I even had some just before.”

Only after she had confirmed when and how he had taken the medicine did the Empress let her worry subside a little.

“So, you really did take it all.”

“When have I ever lied to you?”

“Never. You’ve never lied… but….”

His grip tightened around the Empress’s shoulder. The Emperor slowly raised his hand and held hers. The Empress’s hand was soft and warm, but the Emperor’s was rough like old bark and cold as a corpse.

“Sorry, did I startle you?”

However, before the Emperor’s hand fully withdrew, the Empress’s hand came down and held his tightly.

“I wasn’t startled.”

The Emperor was a little surprised, then he laughed. The two held hands for a long time, receiving the sunset that poured through the window.

After a while, as the Emperor’s hand warmed from the heat transferred from the Empress’s hand, the conversation resumed.

“By the way, did the Duke Peletta’s visit go well? How was he?”

“I’m still unsure.”

The Emperor responded in a soft voice.

“But he seemed more enthusiastic than I thought. I was a bit surprised when he volunteered to do the task we had planned to delegate to the mages. I wonder what got into him.”

“Isn’t that a good thing? Duke Peletta is undoubtedly worried about you as well.”

“Well, he would be worried. The ordeal I’m going through will inevitably be his burden someday.”

“There you go again, speaking so harshly on purpose.”

The Empress applied a slight pressure to the hand she had placed on the Emperor’s shoulder. Despite being brothers, closer and more caring for each other than anyone else, the Emperor never openly displayed it.

Considering the enemies scattered around them, it might have been inevitable, but the Empress felt a faint sadness whenever she saw the pessimistic attitude the Emperor displayed.

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Chapter 58

“Did you not say there is a mysterious power in the Red Stone? I am certain that Duke Peletta will find a way to make it serve your cause.”

“…”

“The court mages and the priests of the Sun God are all working day and night for you, Your Majesty. And I too…”

The Empress trailed off, forcing a smile onto her face.

“Please continue to take the herbs I’ve prepared for you, replenish your energy, and you’ll surely find a solution. Everything will be fine.”

Hmm. The Emperor swallowed the murmurs he couldn’t bring himself to voice directly to his Empress.

Even if he could mend what was already broken, how long would it last?

—

On an unusually sunny afternoon, three people stood in a deserted physical training field set up behind the Cavalry barracks. They were Yuder, Kanna, and Gakane.

“Before we start, how are you feeling?”

At Yuder’s question, Kanna and Gakane closed their eyes, seemingly checking their own conditions.

“I’m… fine.”

“Me too.”

“Commander, do you not need to step back a bit?”

“Ah, I’m also fine, of course. Don’t worry about me and proceed.”

Kishiar, who had elegantly seated herself at a table a bit away from the trio, waved his hand with a languid smile.

At the same time, Nathan, who had appeared from inside the barracks, placed a teacup from the tray he was carrying in front of Kishiar.

As he poured tea from a teapot - too small in comparison to his hands - into the cup, a crisp and fragrant smell filled the dusty training field, seeming rather out of place.

“Such a wonderful aroma.”

“It’s tea made from the leaves of a medicinal herb the Empress has recently cultivated. She sent it while you were away on your mission.”

“Her Majesty? Always in her debt. I suppose I’ll have to write her a letter of thanks.”

While Kishiar’s side was filled with serenity, the area surrounding Yuder was tense.

Starting that day, Kanna and Gakane had decided to train under Yuder for the development of their abilities. Although it might seem odd to receive training from Yuder, who was essentially a fellow soldier even if he was the commander’s assistant, the two of them had no objections, having seen his skills firsthand.

Normally, many soldiers should have been in full swing training at that time. But now, there was no one except them. This was because

the entire Cavalry had started a holiday that Kishiar had granted the day before.

When all the nobles turned their eyes to the Cavalry after the incident of driving out Count Gallon, Kishiar seemed to have been waiting for the moment, announcing a week-long holiday.

The official reason was to celebrate the successful completion of the Cavalry's first mission. But in reality, a select few knew that it was a maneuver to prevent the Red Stone hidden within the Cavalry from being exposed to unnecessary attention.

The soldiers didn't know that the secret mission of their comrades, which had ended in success and a big reward, was to retrieve the Red Stone. However, they were extremely pleased to get a holiday thanks to it.

There were quite a few people in the Cavalry, like Yuder, who were not confident of their admission and had left things to settle back in their hometowns.

Including those who wanted to show their families what they would be like after being admitted, most of the soldiers left the barracks immediately.

The vacation plan had initially begun due to a conversation with Yuder during the mission to recover the Red Stone, but Yuder himself had ultimately given up the vacation. He couldn't afford to spend a whole week of his scant month dedicated to locating the Red Stone on something like a holiday.

There were also a few members, aside from Yuder, who didn't take the vacation. Most of them either had no place to return to, or their homes were too far to visit within a week. Among them was Kanna, of course.

At first, Yuder had planned to take her alone for personal training to improve her abilities. After the holiday, he intended to strengthen all members' abilities even further, and had requested Kishiar for permission related to the training.

However, the problem was that Gakane was present when Yuder approached Kanna to propose training together during the holiday.

"Training with Kanna? For a whole week? I want to join too. Let me do it."

At first, Yuder refused. Training two people with different abilities could reduce his focus. However, Gakane was extremely persistent. He immediately canceled his plan to spend his vacation in his hometown and clung to Yuder.

Since he had received permission from Kishiar to participate in the training plan, he would train the other members like Kanna in enhanced training after a week anyway. So he argued there was no need to do it first. But Gakane was adamant. His obsession with strength was beyond what Yuder had imagined.

"You're training with Kanna because the leader ordered you to investigate the Red Stone, right? You think her current abilities are insufficient, so you're trying to teach Kanna something more, aren't you? Then my shadow will definitely be helpful too!"

It was natural for him to think so, having seen Kishiar take back the Red Stone that they thought would be presented to the emperor. However, the one who ordered it was not Kishiar but Yuder himself, something Gakane naturally could not guess.

Until then, Yuder had thought of Gakane as just a good-natured and diligent guy. But seeing his determination not to shy away from following him even to the restroom, Yuder's perception changed.

Gakane Bolunwald was a persistent bugger who pretended to be nice.

“Yuder, please. I already know how tremendous your skills are. How could I give up such an opportunity? I want to become as strong as you. If I can train with you, I’ll do whatever you say. I really mean it.”

“…”

After being hassled all day, Yuder finally let out a long sigh.

“It’s just one week. Nothing might change, and you may only suffer. Even so, are you willing to do as I say?”

“Of course! If I gain nothing, that’s my fault. I’ll never blame you.”

The Yuder from his past life might have refused nonetheless. But Yuder eventually nodded. If the one eager to walk the path of hardship regretted it, so be it - it wouldn’t be his loss.

“Alright.”

“Thank you, Yuder!”

Gakane hugged Yuder tightly, his face filled with emotion.

When Kanna heard that Gakane would be training with them, she was greatly relieved that she wouldn’t be alone.

To her, Yuder was a cherished comrade who was nothing less than a lifesaver, but he was sometimes even more inscrutable than Kishiar. The thought of training one-on-one with such a person for a whole week had made her secretly anxious.

And so, two members became the first subjects of Yuder’s ability enhancement training. Kishiar expressed great interest in this training plan and declared that he would definitely observe it.

Thus, today's situation had been set in motion.

The training ground they were to use was constructed in a place that could never be seen from the outside. Despite being right behind their lodgings, it was not visible from within, making it exceedingly suitable for a training session like today's.

"Yuder. But, can I… can I really do it? Even with training, can I actually develop my ability enough to read an object's information without touching it within a month…?"

Kanna asked with a worried expression. She was aware of the potency of Yuder's ability, but she was the one receiving the training. With the leader, Kishiar, watching over her, she felt afraid that she might disappoint them again, like the time when she was unable to help during the Red Stone retrieval mission.

"You can do it."

Yuder answered with short but assured certainty, then pulled out an object he had brought earlier. Kanna and Gakane's gaze focused on it.

"A book…?"

"What are you going to do with that?"

"Kanna, try reading the information of this book using your ability first."

Yuder purposely turned the back of the book to Kanna so she couldn't see the title. With a puzzled expression, Kanna approached and placed her hand on the book. Soon, a transparent energy began to ripple slightly between her fingers.

"Hmm… it's a book that has been handled by many people. Most of them seem to think it's a difficult book. It seems to be about 20

years old… a source of warm comfort…”

As Kanna spoke, her words gradually became less coherent and eventually faded. Yuder quietly observed her.

“I can’t read any more than this. This is my limit.”

“Kanna, when you use your ability, what do you usually think about?”

At Yuder’s sudden question, Kanna’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Huh? I just… I don’t think about anything. Only about needing to read quickly…?”

“I see. Then, this time, try using your ability while focusing on the thought that you must read information related to the title or content of this book. Can you do that?”

“I’ve never tried before… but I’ll give it a shot.”

Kanna took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Once again, she placed her hand on the book, and a short time later, a ripple, larger than before, began to emerge. Gakane, who was right next to her, seemed to notice this ripple as well, as he held his breath and looked surprised.

“…In the beginning, there was a land without light. One day, God took pity on those wandering in the darkness and cast down light. The first light was small and hard, clustered like a pebble… Remember the first sentence well, as it’s the most important. The first of 14 chapters, in total 99 chapters…? This is…”

Slowly muttering, Kanna opened her eyes and looked down at the book with a stunned expression.

“This is the Scripture of the Sun God, isn’t it?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Yuder flipped the book over. It was indeed an old copy of the Scripture of the Sun God. Despite being quite worn from many hands over a long time, the cover still looked clean, as if it had been carefully preserved.

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Chapter 59

Yuder had borrowed it from one of the Cavalry members returning home the day before.

He remembered that the man, a devout follower of the Sun God from a pious family, always carried multiple holy books. Believing Yuder to be a fellow devotee, the man had willingly lent him a copy.

While not everyone deeply believed in the deity, most people on the continent had grown up closely observing and interacting with the temples of the Sun God from a young age.

Therefore, even the commoners who could barely read were generally aware of the contents of the holy book. It was common knowledge. This was precisely why Yuder had chosen the holy book as his first training tool.

“Well, do you understand something now?”

“Huh?”

“Kanna, if you want, you can limit the scope of the information you read.”

At Yuder’s words, Kanna’s expression reflected a sudden realization.

“Oh… I see. I didn’t know. I’ve never thought about it before…”

Of course, she hadn’t. Until now, she was satisfied as long as she could read anything, and that had been enough.

However, to develop abilities like hers, it wasn’t sufficient to just read anything well.

If one attempted to absorb excessive information without restraint, they would soon hit their limit. Her habit of abruptly stopping after reading a few words without order was likely due to using her ability aimlessly.

“So, you must start by setting a goal and start from a narrow scope. First, practice reading the small things in detail, then gradually move on to more detailed and broader aspects. Eventually, you should be able to select and read the more critical information.”

It was akin to practicing speed-reading. Initially, you would read each line thoroughly, and later, you would skim while still identifying the essential sentences.

Of course, this wasn’t a skill that could be mastered overnight. It would require consistent practice daily. It was something that would gradually prove its worth over time.

“Practicing with books would be best. At first, just touch the book and read only the information related to the content, then check how accurate you were. Once you’re comfortable with that, move on to the author, when the book was written, and its previous owners. It might be easier to read if you start from the most recent person and go backwards.”

“Ah…”

Kanna nodded frantically, trying her best to remember Yuder’s words.

“Do I do this every day?”

“Yes. And there’s something else you need to do.”

Yuder pulled out a thin cloth from his pocket, wrapped half of the holy book, and placed it on the ground.

“Try to read the information of the book you just read in this state.”

“…But I’ll only be able to read the information of the cloth?”

“Place half of your hand on the book and half on the cloth. Which one do you think you’ll be able to read?”

“Well…”

Kanna’s expression changed peculiarly.

“I’m not sure.”

“Try it. If the information of two objects tries to come in at once, try to read only the book’s information. It’s a practice of selecting information. Since it’s the information of a book you’ve read once, you should be able to read it more easily.”

“I… I’ll try.”

As Yuder suggested, Kanna placed half of her hand on the cloth and the other half on the book, then closed her eyes again. The formless energy bursting from her hand was even larger and clearer during the second attempt, pulsating intensely.

Kanna’s forehead was drenched in sweat, a clear sign of her struggle. Her energy had fluctuated, growing and shrinking several times.

“Uh…”

“Keep concentrating. Keep at it. Don’t give up.”

“My, my head hurts… I didn’t know choosing to read would be this tough…”

It was to be expected. Growth, after all, often demanded pushing oneself to the limit just to advance a single step.

However, the moment of using one's ability to its limit was often a moment of life-threatening danger. Therefore, many Awakeners only managed to grow within the brink of death.

This faulty method of growth was something Yuder realized only quite late.

'If you steer in the right direction and continuously stimulate your limit without endangering your life, you can still grow without facing such a crisis.'

The important thing was to keep trying to exceed the limit of one's abilities, not to actually put oneself in danger.

After watching Kanna struggle so diligently, Yuder turned his head. Gakane, who had been observing the two with his mouth slightly ajar, quickly straightened up in surprise.

"Gakane. You're next. Are you ready?"

"Of course! Just tell me what to do!"

It was admirable to see a student brimming with so much enthusiasm. Even recalling his past life, Yuder could not remember a junior who sought to learn with such passion. Viewing Gakane with the heart of a former Cavalry commander, Yuder nodded in approval.

"First, bring out your shadow."

Before he could even finish speaking, Gakane's shadow abruptly rose to its feet. The black silhouette had the exact height and build as its master.

"How far have you tested the limits of your shadow?"

“Limit… I’m not sure. It just moves as I think…”

Gakane muttered as he looked at his shadow clone with unfamiliarity. He believed that by strengthening his own abilities, he could better control his shadow, thus he rarely used his powers and focused more on physical training and swordsmanship.

That, of course, was a good method of training. But in Yuder’s opinion, a pioneer who had repeatedly clashed and eventually reached the end in his field, such a method alone clearly had limitations.

‘Blindly training the body without knowing how far the shadow clone can exert its power is like a horse running with its eyes covered. It can run, but reaching the destination is difficult. It’s a reckless approach.’

From what Yuder had observed so far, his clone was capable of effortlessly lifting several long spears at once. This indicated that it could exert physical force, and that its strength was far superior to that of humans.

And when it touched the Red Stone, the arm that exploded out was returned to shadow by Gakane, and when it was summoned again, it returned to its original form.

If a shadow clone could recover from damage in such a way, shouldn’t one naturally want to find out how far its limits went?

“Have you ever struggled while handling your shadow clone?”

“Um… No. I don’t think I ever did.”

Gakane shook his head as he recalled his memories.

“Good. Then let’s test today how far you need to go before it becomes hard.”

Yuder casually drew the training sword he had at his waist. The training sword was blunt without any sharp parts, but that was sufficient.

With a light gathering of force, red flames erupted from the sword in an instant. Overwhelmed by the intense heat and momentum, Gakane's expression hardened.

"From now on, I will attack your shadow clone. Do not move your main body, stand still, and use your clone to evade and block the attacks."

"What?"

"Let's start."

Without giving Gakane any time to think, Yuder lunged at the shadow clone. As he swung his flame-wielding sword, the clone staggered back to avoid the blow. But it was too late; one of its arms had already been severed.

"…"

Unlike humans, the shadow did not scream or show any signs of pain. The severed arm vanished as if it had never been there.

"Defend properly. If you can't move, revert to shadow form and resummon. We're starting from the beginning."

"Ah, got it. But I don't understand how I'm supposed to block a sword with a shadow……"

"How is it possible for a shadow to carry multiple people? You've already been doing it all unconsciously, you just haven't realized it. Concentrate."

"…ugh…!"

“Move your clone solely through will. Don’t open your mouth to command it, and don’t move your own body.”

Even as he issued these instructions, Yuder continued to swing his sword relentlessly. The shadow clone, slower than a human, could not properly evade even the casually swung sword.

As Gakane’s shadow clone continued to take damage and disintegrate, just before a final blow was about to strike its head, Gakane closed his eyes tightly and swallowed hard.

At that moment, a miracle happened. The shadow clone raised its remaining arm in a flash, wrapping around its head to block the attack.

It felt as if Yuder’s sword had struck an invisible wall made of wind. A strange sensation traveled up his arm, and moments later, the blade was deflected.

“Wha…?”

Yuder nodded at Gakane’s shocked expression, which said, “I can’t believe I just did that.”

“Good. Let’s continue.”

“Wait! Give me a moment to think about how I just did that… Just a moment!”

There was no moment to be had. Yuder continued to batter Gakane’s shadow mercilessly, ignoring Kanna’s increasing frustration from the noise disrupting her concentration. Watching from the sidelines, Kishiar sipped his tea with a look of pure enjoyment.

“Look, Nathan. Isn’t it amazing? It’s as if a swordmaster is training a novice. I was curious about his teaching skills when he

confidently asked for training authority, but the dreams of the squad members returning from vacation will be shattered. Hahaha.”

“…It seems so.”

From a swordmaster’s perspective, Yuder’s swordsmanship was not particularly impressive. However, the powerful fire and water constantly emanating from his weapon, as well as his exceptional battle senses and judgment, could not be ignored.

How much practice must he have had to be so adept at this strange combat style, being neither a mage nor a swordsman?

Even if he had awakened quickly, it was only two years ago. Was it really possible to build such skills in that time frame?

Ever since first meeting him, Nathan Zuckerman had been continually investigating Yuder Aile’s background. But just as his lord had predicted, there was nothing to find. His past was impeccably clean.

The only certainty was that, as an Awakener, he was a prodigy to a degree that would make anyone envious.

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Chapter 60

“If he can fight so well simply by spewing fire and water from his sword, he would become a complete monster if he mastered any more techniques.”

“Do you see it that way?”

Upon hearing Nathan’s muttering, Kishiar softly retorted.

“Do you think differently, sir?”

“In my eyes, I see a powerful beast trying to make itself small.”

Kishiar, after taking a sip of his tea, followed Yuder’s movements without missing a beat, his red eyes unblinking.

“Liars can recognize other liars. For some reason, that captivating beast is intentionally hiding his strength.”

“You’re saying he’s hiding his strength?”

Nathan was the type who would believe his lord even if he claimed the sun rose in the west, but this time, he couldn’t help but question him.

It was plain to see that Yuder Aile possessed exceptional skills, and he was an audacious man who had no intention of hiding his superior qualities. The idea that this man, who seemed least likely to hide anything in the world, was concealing even greater power within, was difficult to believe.

“He’s hiding it. A lot of it.”

“So he’s indeed suspicious.”

“But your investigation turned up nothing?”

“…”

“Nathan. It’s time to trust your instincts over your suspicions. I’ve decided that he is essential to the Cavalry unit I plan to create. I don’t know why, but that charming beast isn’t sparing his body for me and the Cavalry unit. Isn’t he boldly demonstrating his ability and teaching two people in an environment where he might be doubted? And doing both at the same time.”

Nathan nearly blurted out, “What exactly is charming about him?” but managed to swallow the words. A charming beast? Was he referring to the formidable man before their eyes? Even he would doubt his ears if he heard such a nickname.

However, as Kishiar watched Yuder, his red eyes truly seemed filled with joy. He was always cheerful, but Nathan, having observed Kishiar for a long time, knew how to distinguish between his genuine and fake smiles. Surprisingly, his lord was sincerely smiling now.

“If it wasn’t for him, I might have been seriously injured while retrieving the Red Stone this time. Or, using an unexpected amount of power might have put a crack in the balance I was barely maintaining.”

“That’s too speculative.”

“Yes. But you also know that there’s no guarantee that such things wouldn’t have happened, right?”

Nathan remained silent, knowing that Kishiar’s words were correct. His lord was always teetering on the edge.

But in the past few years, it had become even more precarious, the line he was walking on seeming as thin as a thread.

Kishiar, who seemed to have received all the blessings of heaven, became even more dangerous as these blessings accumulated. Neither friend nor foe left him alone. Such was his destiny.

“Regardless, it’s true that he risked his life for me that day. If he was a spy sent by the dukes, he certainly wouldn’t have left me in that situation.”

“…”

“I wonder where such a character came from. It’s really interesting.”

“Too much attention can be dangerous…”

Nathan had only managed to utter a single word, but Kishiar merely responded with a soft smile, not a verbal reply. His gaze remained steadfast on the man with black hair, who was ruthlessly swinging his sword, not moving in the slightest.

“Well… it might be a bit late to worry about that.”

His voice was so soft, even Nathan, the Swordmaster, couldn’t properly hear him.

Nathan refilled the seemingly delighted lord’s empty teacup. As he did so, Kishiar’s eyes slightly narrowed at the sight of a small, neatly folded note that had slipped underneath the teacup’s saucer.

“What’s this?”

“While I was preparing the tea, a courier arrived from the Rik Mountains. You must have seen enough of the training, please take a look at this as well.”

Kishiar knew this was Nathan's attempt to distract him from watching Yuder, but he showed no sign of it and merely smiled. As he unfolded the note to read it, a few unrecognizable emotions flickered across his eyes.

"Place this inside my quarters' desk later."

"Yes."

Kishiar handed the note back to Nathan after reading it. Nathan clutched it in his palm as if it were glued there, naturally hiding it from the view of others.

Yuder, Gakane, and Kanna continued their vigorous training, paying them no mind. Kishiar, while watching them, opened his mouth without changing his expression.

"It seems that they've discovered a place near the base that appears to have been inhabited by beasts. However, no evidence to suggest who might be behind this has emerged."

As this was expected, Nathan was not surprised.

"If they're that thorough, they won't give up just because of one failure."

"Indeed. The thought of those we didn't dare to touch over the last two years now flocking to us is already tiresome."

"Even so, didn't you bring the stone for His Majesty despite all this?"

Kishiar didn't respond to that. The conversation he had with the emperor when he went to the palace with the Red Stone he had retrieved a few days ago flowed through his mind.

'Kishiar. So, is your vessel still fine?'

‘Thanks to your concern, brother, it’s perfectly fine.’

When they were alone, Kishiar called the emperor ‘brother’. Although this was against etiquette, when they were alone, the emperor called him by his real name, not his title, so it was all the same.

‘What a pity. If the late empress saw you alive and breathing healthily without any outburst, she would undoubtedly have been so upset that she would have risen from her grave. It’s quite regrettable that I can’t show her that her most important decision was so wrong.’

The emperor’s red eyes, visible through his glasses, shone with a cold, mocking smile. That mockery was directed not at Kishiar, but at the now-deceased empress. Guessing what era the emperor was recalling, Kishiar replied with a soft smile.

‘Well, it’s all in the past anyway.’

‘Yes, it’s all in the past. Her forcing you into the position of duke, and the fact that because of that, I had to hand over the throne to my enemies in my court, it’s all in the past.’

The emperor’s gaze, coldly muttering, turned to the box that Kishiar was holding. Kishiar was opening the box from a distance, as the emperor had expressed his wish to see the Red Stone.

‘That worthless little stone is really the Red Stone. Even as I see it, I can’t believe it.’

“Everyone seems to say so.”

“If that tiny thing truly possessed the power to protect your vessel two years ago, I hope it could be of some help to me this time around…”

A bitter smile crossed the Emperor’s pale face.

“After all that curiosity, seeing it in person doesn’t instill much faith. Perhaps it’s best to let go of any expectations.”

“Such discouraging words after I went through all the trouble to bring it, don’t you think that’s a bit much? Would I have bothered to fetch this if it weren’t for you?”

The Red Stone undoubtedly held an incomprehensible, immense power. However, Kishiar never once desired or admired its power. The Emperor knew this all too well.

“You have quite the way with words. Is this why the benevolent man I know put me through so much hardship by forming a Cavalry?”

“If the Cavalry hadn’t been formed, we wouldn’t have been able to retrieve the Red Stone safely, so it was a necessary step. Holding onto resentment for so long isn’t good for your health.”

“At this point, what’s health to a man on his deathbed?”

All that was left was the slow tightening of the noose and the inevitable end. The Emperor’s eyes told this tale.

“Oh dear. Where did the tyrant who hurried me every day to fetch the stone go? Did you really issue such an order just to torment your only brother? How disappointing. When did you stop believing in miracles….”

“Enough. Stop talking.”

The Emperor waved his hand with a tired face. After telling Kishiar to close the box, he beckoned him closer.

Kishiar placed the box at his feet and knelt in front of the Emperor. The Emperor stared at the face of his brother, a face both similar and dissimilar to his own.

Bitterness, worry, relief, and countless other emotions surged in his eyes before receding, like sand washed away by the tide.

“Kishiar.”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t order the quick retrieval simply because of a vain desire to expand my power. I believe you still have a chance, unlike me. If, after you and the mages have finished investigating and it turns out that the power of the stone truly helps the vessel, I will order you to use it first, even if it’s just a moment sooner.”

“Your wife would have been saddened to hear that.”

The Emperor’s gaze softened momentarily at Kishiar’s calm response to his astounding declaration. A profound longing was replaced by renewed determination.

“I’m not joking. Listen well. But if the opposite happens…”

The Emperor coughed a few times and muttered with a grave look.

“If it turns out that the stone’s power is of no help to us, I’ll leave the next steps to you. Whether you take it or destroy it, it’s entirely up to you. However, it must never fall into the hands of the Dukes or the Crown Prince….”

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‘The Red Stone must never fall into the hands of the Dukes and the Crown Prince…’

‘…’

“Sir, your tea has cooled. I will dispose of it and pour a fresh cup.”

Kishiar, reflecting on the Emperor’s last words, blinked and straightened his posture. As Nathan had pointed out, the tea in front of him had completely cooled.

The training that had been ongoing before his eyes seemed to have taken a brief respite, as Yuder, Gakane, and Kanna were all sitting on the ground, engaged in a conversation.

“No, it’s fine. I’ll be leaving now.”

Kishiar rose from his seat, his gaze lingering on them. He had intentionally refrained from making any noise to avoid disrupting the training, so he didn’t attract the attention of the three.

“Nathan, even in my absence, have a few pairs of eyes nearby so that we can know how the training progresses.”

“Understood.”

Nathan bowed his head as he cleared away the teacups. As Kishiar prepared to return to his quarters, he turned as though a thought had suddenly occurred to him.

“…Ah. And if my assistant shows any signs of abnormality, no matter how slight, report it immediately without making any judgments.”

His gaze lingered on Yuder Aile’s gloved hand, then vanished.

—

“That’s it for today. Starting from tomorrow, come out an hour earlier, run through the basic physical training course, and be prepared.”

“…”

“Answer.”

“Yes…”

“Understood…”

Upon hearing Yuder’s firm voice, Gakane and Kanna managed to respond, gasping for breath. They lay strewn about on the training ground with no sign of getting up.

The moment Yuder turned to leave, Nathan, who had been watching from afar, gestured as if he had been waiting.

“The Duke has instructed you to go to his quarters once training is over.”

“…Understood.”

Yuder had thought Nathan would accompany him, but Nathan had other tasks and disappeared somewhere. Thus, Yuder had to climb the stairs alone.

Gakane and Kanna, looked at Yuder, still standing strong even after helping with the grueling training, as if he were a monster. But in reality, he was far from fine.

His body, which had been subjected to harsh training until sunset, throbbed with each step, and he had a substantial headache along

with a pit in his stomach where his mana hole was. It was because he had pushed his strength to its limit.

‘If it were the old days, I wouldn’t have thought it to be this hard… Returning to the past has certainly changed my condition.’

“Commander, I’ll go in now.”

Yuder knocked on the door at the top floor upon arrival and immediately entered. Kishiar, seated at his desk, studying something, glanced up at Yuder and smiled.

“You look quite tired.”

“If it’s not tiring, it’s not training.”

“True.”

Nodding, Kishiar rose from his seat. Lighting a magic stone casually, he walked around the warmth-radiating stove and sat in the guest chair.

“Come this way.”

Yuder slowly moved toward the chair opposite Kishiar, his gaze inadvertently drifting towards the stove.

His sword was beautifully positioned on top of the stove as it had been today. Its unusual aura was the same as before, but Yuder suddenly felt that the sword was somehow different from before.

‘The energy… it’s somehow different from before.’

Today, the peculiar energy that had previously reached out so blatantly as if to guard against him was absent. He wasn’t sure if it was just his mood, or a temporary situation, but Kishiar didn’t make any comment, whether he noticed it or not.

Yuder sat down and decided to silently wait for whatever Kishiar had to say to him.

‘He’ll probably talk about today’s training.’

“Would you take off your gloves?”

But, as always, Kishiar diverged from Yuder’s expectations. Yuder maintained a silent pause for a moment, then his face hardened in surprise.

“Pardon?”

“I’m talking about the gloves. The ones I gave you.”

Kishiar repeated his request more explicitly, thinking that Yuder hadn’t fully understood him.

“Why the gloves, all of a sudden? Do I have to take them off?”

“I want to check something. Or, did you perhaps find a reason that you can’t take them off?”

What more could be said when the one who gave the gloves was asking such a thing? Yuder hesitated for a moment, but then slowly began to remove his left glove first, then tugged at the end of the right glove.

However, when half of the back of his hand was revealed, his movement halted as if time had frozen.

“Just as I suspected,” Kishiar said, sweeping his gaze over the back of Yuder’s hand.

“Why didn’t you mention this earlier?”

“How did you know?”

Yuder looked down at the purplish speckles that nearly covered the back of his hand. He felt a strange sensation, like a child caught hiding something. The situation was indeed not very different.

Yuder quickly hid his surprise and spoke as calmly as possible.

“I didn’t think you had clairvoyant abilities.”

“Of course, I don’t. But, I thought now was the most appropriate time to check.”

After saying that, Kishiar lightly tugged at one side of the glove hanging from Yuder’s fingertips and pulled it off completely.

“When you explained the circumstances of your previous injury, you mentioned that the speckles started out very small and grew this big after defeating those intruders. So, I thought the speckles might also grow when you use your ability… but you didn’t have a chance to use your ability since then, right?”

Just as Kishiar said, there hadn’t been a need to use his power since retrieving the Red Stone and visiting the palace.

However, on the day Yuder drove out Count Gallon by force, he discovered that the speckles on the back of his hand had slightly grown after taking off his gloves at night.

Thinking it might recover on its own, he left it alone, but seeing how it had changed after a whole day of training, the cause and effect became undeniably clear. It was just as Kishiar had guessed.

“Why didn’t you report immediately after the incident with Count Gallon?”

“At that time, the change wasn’t clear perhaps because I hadn’t used my power for a long time. There was also no pain, so I thought maybe… I’m sorry.”

Regardless of the reason, he had to apologize. As Yuder immediately bowed his head, Kishiar clicked his tongue lightly from above. It seemed as if he understood Yuder wasn't accustomed to reporting every personal issue.

"Do you still feel no pain? What if I press it like this?"

Before Yuder could react, Kishiar grabbed his hand and pressed his thumb on the speckles.

"…It feels normal."

"Any unusual sensation when you use your power?"

"None."

Yuder answered promptly, but Kishiar, as if not believing, probed several times

He had answered obediently, but Kishiar didn't seem to believe him, pressing various spots on the back of his hand several times. It was only after confirming that there was no change in Yuder's expression that Kishiar showed signs of believing him somewhat.

"Alright. Let's try healing now."

"Are you sure? You said I should treat this power as if it doesn't exist."

When Yuder asked cautiously, Kishiar chuckled.

"I did. But where will you go to heal this injury? To a temple? A wound that doesn't fully heal is often seen as a sign of a curse. Even if the priests don't think you're cursed, they might find it strange and report it to their superiors."

"…"

“What do you think would happen then?”

Kishiar, who asked as if he was curious, slowly sprinkled a white light over Yuder’s hand as he continued speaking.

“You’d be dragged off without a bird or a mouse knowing, to deep within the main mountain of the Temple of the Sun God. There, under the guise of a noble sacrifice for all humanity, you’d be put on the experiment table.”

“…You’re not lying? If such things happened, why hasn’t there been any rumor?”

Yuder, combining his experiences from his previous life, knew more about the internal affairs of the temple and the priests than the average person. But he had never heard of such things as Kishiar described.

When he questioned skeptically, Kishiar let out a light laugh.

“Isn’t it obvious? The dead don’t speak, hence no rumors.”

With a single sentence, the noble main mountain of the Temple of the Sun God transformed into a terrifying group that wouldn’t hesitate to commit murder. Considering the speaker was a member of the imperial family who wielded the power of the Sun God, there was no greater blasphemy.

“I heard that priests who blaspheme against the God lose their divine power, but it seems that’s not true.”

“I’m not a priest.”

“…”

Something was strange, but he couldn’t argue against the truth. After a few more such absurd exchanges that left Yuder speechless,

Kishiar gathered the white light and slowly pulled his hand away.

“Indeed, it’s better now.”

However, it was not entirely healed. The spot that had covered Yuder’s hand was reduced to about the size it was when he first got injured.

“…Thank you.”

“If you appreciate it, come straight to me when there’s a change next time.”

That seemed to mean he would have to receive this type of treatment from Kishiar every time he used his power.

Was it really necessary to go that far when there was no pain and it just got a bit bigger? Now he knew for sure when the spot changed and that it got better when he received treatment.

After hesitating for a moment, Yuder spoke.

“Do I… have to do that? There’s no pain, so it seems alright to just leave it alone for a while and see what changes occur.”

“That’s reckless. What if that spot spreads and reaches your heart or vital organs, and turns out to be a type of curse that kills instantly? You only have one life, and I only have one assistant, so take the treatment when I offer it.”

“But if we have to do this every time…”

Divine power was a force that was wielded at the expense of the user’s vitality. Thankfully, Kishiar’s complexion was still healthy, but Yuder felt a great burden as if he was accumulating a debt to him.

If he had to think about holding hands with him and getting treated every time, he wouldn’t be able to use his power properly in

critical moments.

As Yuder swallowed his words and trailed off, Kishiar smiled gently.

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“Now that we know the cause, we just need to find a complete cure. If we can understand the power held by the Red Stone, we might find the answer. If you feel burdened, well, then, take this.”

Suddenly, Kishiar, who had stood up from his place, went over to the stove. Yuder wondered what he was doing, and to his surprise, he detached one of the decorative gems embedded in the sheath of his divine sword and came back. It was a slender, rhombus-shaped red gem.

“With divine power filled in it, carrying it should considerably slow down the progression.”

“I’m not sure if I can accept such a valuable thing…”

“If you don’t accept it, I’ll have to come up and hold your hand every day, won’t I? Ah, maybe that’s what you hoped for?”

“Thank you for your consideration.”

Yuder did not refuse a second time and quickly accepted it with a bow. Kishiar laughed.

“I’ll overlook it until the range of that mark goes beyond your elbow. It should be fine up to that point. But not any further.”

His words were extremely affectionate yet firm. After all, wasn’t his intention to train the members to find out about the Red Stone?

In the history of the empire, Kishiar might have been the only imperial family member to treat a subordinate of humble origin with such care. However, Yuder didn’t find it pleasant.

Yuder’s return changed many aspects of Kishiar. However, some aspects remained the same.

In his previous life, even after the unpleasant incident involving Yuder, Kishiar had always been kind to him, and although he had built walls, he had treated him more than fairly. One couldn’t deny that he was a very peculiar character, but he was never a bad person.

But how did it all end up?

‘I need to figure out everything I can before my vacation ends.’

If he wanted to avoid getting entangled with Kishiar and protect his life, he needed to understand him better than in his previous life. There was still too much he didn’t know.

—

For the next five days, except for meal times and sleep, Yuder trained Kanna and Gakane without a moment’s rest.

Even the spectators were exhausted, but Yuder never showed any signs of fatigue. So, naturally, Kanna and Gakane could not show their tiredness either.

The two realized that all the training they had received in the Cavalry was nothing compared to Yuder’s training. As they got a bit comfortable, he increased the difficulty, and as soon as they got used to that, he immediately noticed and tried even harder training.

It was astonishing how well he could come up with such brutal training methods.

“That’s it for today. Let’s take a day off tomorrow.”

And finally, on the sixth day, Yuder quietly declared the end of the training with a face no different from when he started. Kanna and Gakane simultaneously collapsed on the training ground floor.

“Ah… I guess this is what feeling like death feels like…”

“Gakane, it’s not feeling like death for me, I’m already dead.”

Despite their words, the expressions of the two lying down were significantly brighter. It was because they had achieved clear results during the hellish six days.

Gakane had come to understand the limits of his shadow clone, and the movement, attack power, and defense power of the clone had grown so much that it couldn’t be compared to before. It was thanks to being ripped and rolled thousands of times under Yuder’s sword.

Kanna too had succeeded in selectively reading only the information of the book, not the heavens, from a book that spanned the sky. Thereupon, Yuder trained her in a similar fashion to place both hands simultaneously on two objects and read only the information from one, and when that was successful, he began to drop the objects very slightly from her fingertips.

At first, she thought it was impossible to read an object from a distance, but it wasn’t. Kanna learned the astonishing fact that as long as an object merely touched the swirling energy flowing from her hands, she could read its information without touching it.

Of course, the distance was only about the length of a fingernail for now and the success rate was very low, but she would gradually increase it.

“Yuder, we’re training with the other classmates starting the day after tomorrow, right?”

“Yes.”

“Haha. I’m looking forward to it. Really.”

Gakane laughed cheerfully with a face caked in dust. Yuder wondered if Gakane had become a little strange due to the excessive training over the past six days.

‘As long as we continue like this, there won’t be any sudden deaths wherever we go.’

Gakane’s death had not yet come, but the situation was constantly changing, and they didn’t know what would happen next.

However, if Gakane didn’t lose his strong desire to become stronger and continued to train, he could achieve a rate of growth that couldn’t be compared to the past.

“But Yuder. We’re taking a break tomorrow, right? Do you have something to do? If not, with me…”

“Huh? I thought I heard a noise in the training ground, and here everyone is?”

As Gakane was about to say something to the absorbed Yuder, someone popped their face out from the dormitory. It was Ever, who had gone back to her hometown for vacation.

“Ever! You’re back now?”

“Kanna. I came back early after seeing my family. But……”

As Kanna stood up with a half-smile, Ever began to approach with a smile but stopped short.

“Why do you all look like that? Covered in dust.”

“Oh, yes. Hahaha. We three didn’t take a vacation, right? We had nothing to do, so we did some independent training and ended up like this.”

“But what kind of training did you do to……”

Kanna stuttered as she glanced at Yuder’s expression. It wasn’t time to let the other members know why they had been training so hard. Fortunately, Ever didn’t suspect much.

“Training is good, but do it moderately. But if you’ve been here the whole time… Do you know when those strange people outside arrived?”

Ever’s last question was directed at Yuder. After a moment of thought, Yuder opened his mouth.

“Strange people, what do you mean?”

“Oh. Didn’t you see? I saw a suspicious duo on my way back to the dormitory. They were going around the Imperial Knight’s grounds, grabbing anyone and asking about the Cavalry, so I avoided them.”

“A duo?”

“How could such people enter here?”

Kanna and Gakane asked, their faces full of incomprehension. Yuder, hearing the word “duo”, pondered for a moment before throwing a question at Ever.

“Did you happen to get a good look at their appearances?”

“One was an old man. He had a very long beard. And the other was young, but they didn’t look like a grandfather and grandson.”

The look in Yuder’s eyes changed instantly. He seemed to know who they were. It was Thais Yulman, the elder mage of the Pearl Tower, whom he had met in the imperial palace, and his apprentice. As if recalling the same memory, Kanna turned her surprised face toward Yuder.

“Yuder. Could they be the ones we saw at the imperial palace…? Did the Count send people again?”

“It has nothing to do with the Count.”

Yuder answered succinctly, shaking his head.

“But the people we saw, they must be the ones. They said they’re looking for the Cavalry. We should go meet them.”

“In that state?”

Ever asked incredulously. Yuder glanced down at his uniform, which was more dirty than its original black, and nodded.

“Yes.”

“Yuder. I want to go with you.”

“Me too.”

Upon hearing this, Kanna and Gakane immediately rose to their feet and volunteered to follow. Every time they moved, dust billowed up, causing Ever to crinkle her nose.

“Nobody will believe the three of you are from the Cavalry in that state. I’ll come too.”

—

The Cavalry’s quarters were situated in the most remote corner of the Imperial Knight’s compound. The Knights, proud of their

Imperial Knight’s ground, treated the intruding Cavalry as an eyesore, practically ignoring them as if they didn’t exist.

It was easy to enter the compound of the Imperial Knights, but no one among the wandering Knights reacted to the name of the Cavalry. Therefore, anyone visiting the Cavalry for the first time could never find their destination.

Respected elder Thais Yulman of the Pearl Tower and his apprentice, Alik Pelgin, were also struggling, wandering around the vast compound since morning.

“Master. Wouldn’t it have been better to send a formal letter to Duke Peletta expressing our wish to visit first? If we continue like this, we’ll spend the whole day wandering around.”

“You imbecile. Make sense. Do you think if I said I wanted to go there, the Duke of Peletta would welcome me warmly? If the Red Stone is in their hands, they wouldn’t accept any outside visitors, especially us from the Pearl Tower! So it’s best to go and try our luck!”

“But first, we need to find them to take a shot, don’t we? Moreover, we’re not even sure if the stone is really there.”

“We’ve already confirmed it’s not in the palace. There’s nothing more certain than the information leaked by the Duke of Diarca. They purposely leaked it to me, so we have nothing to lose. Stop complaining and move forward.”

Alik felt extremely aggrieved. Their purpose wasn’t suspicious at all, so what was wrong with contacting them beforehand?

He had long gotten used to his master’s eccentricities, but it was heartbreaking to see himself suffer like this.

“There are a few more Knights over there. Go ask them.”

Just then, a few Knights with flashy swords appeared before their eyes. The Knight in the lead, who was guiding two young men, was particularly arrogant and sharp-looking, undoubtedly from a noble family.

Alik, pushed by his master, timidly approached them.

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Chapter 63

“I am a visitor and wish to ask for something.”

“Excuse me?”

As soon as Alik spoke, the Knights halted their steps in unison. Alik quickly scanned the blue uniform of the leading knight, noticing the golden eagle emblem and three lilies engraved on it.

“I heard that somewhere around here, the Cav… no, the Duke of Peletta… is staying. I got lost while trying to find him. Could you kindly help me?”

Alik swiftly changed his words as he caught sight of the knight’s expression twisting at the beginning of the word ‘Cav’.

Every Imperial Knight they had encountered so far disappeared as soon as they heard the word ‘Cav’, but this was the first time one had become outright hostile.

“The Duke of Peletta? For what reason do you seek him?”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t disclose that.”

How could he tell them that he was a mage from the Pearl Tower, who had heard about the Red Stone and came to conduct some research? Moreover, he wasn’t even an invited guest.

As Alik awkwardly smiled and shook his head, the knight studied him and Thais standing behind him, lost in thought. His deep, black eyes, shining arrogantly, turned fierce after a moment.

“Take these men and lock them up.”

“Pardon?”

Alik couldn’t believe his ears. Yet, the Knight’s orders continued unabated.

“Considering they’re hiding their purpose of visit, there’s no doubt they’re suspicious. They must be connected to those vile insects. We need to find out what they’re planning. Arrest them immediately!”

The Knights behind him bowed their heads in response and rushed to seize Alik and Thais. Alik had been through a lot while serving his research-obsessed master, but being arrested by knights and facing the risk of imprisonment was a first.

“Wait, sir knight! We’re not suspicious! We even have proper passes! If you check them, you’ll see!”

“Such things can be easily forged.”

“Then we can go to the imperial palace…! We have everything there to verify our identities!”

“The imperial palace? You expect me to believe that now?”

The knight smirked, looking them over in their shabby attire.

Today, Alik and Thais had dressed as commoners to maintain their anonymity. Therefore, they had left their pearl badges, which signified their membership in the Pearl Tower, at the Palace Mages’ Tower.

If they had known this would happen, they would have definitely carried their badges! Alik heaved a deep sigh, but it was too late.

‘Master, this is all your fault. You need to say something!’

As Alik internally fumed and turned his gaze towards his master, Thais, who had been quietly observing the knights holding his arms,

finally spoke.

“Young knight, may I know your name?”

“I have no name to tell suspicious people.”

“We merely asked for help because we were lost. Do you think it’s right to arrest us without any evidence, circumstantial proof, or even verifying our names, simply based on speculation and emotion? Is this what the Imperial Knights, the pride of the Orr Empire, stand for?”

Thais had held the position of a senior member at the Pearl Tower for over 20 years, and it wasn’t without reason. His voice was filled with a dignity and gravity that couldn’t be easily dismissed.

It seemed the knights considered him an unusual man, as they exchanged glances, but the knight who stood at the forefront, bearing three lilies, merely snorted at his words.

“How dare you disparage the Imperial Knights with your foul tongue. I will not fall for such a ruse!”

“Sir Kiolle, even so, shouldn’t we at least verify his identity before making such accusations? Or perhaps we could contact Duke Peletta…”

The knight beside him grumbled with an uncomfortable expression, but the one called Kiolle flared up at his words.

“Yelsin! Are you on his side too?”

“N-no, I’m not.”

“Then keep your mouth shut and follow my orders!”

He had dealt with countless arrogant nobles, but Kiolle was different. Alik decided to never forget the name of this detestable

man. Despite serving under his master as if he were a servant, Alik was a talented mage from a noble family with a surname.

The position of the elder's direct disciple was not obtained for no reason. Being looked down upon in this way for the first time, despite being expected by his peers to succeed his master and be the future of the tower, was a new experience for him.

'If our master, who became an elder through elemental magic, were here, he would've let out a blast of magic and put an end to this.'

However, Thais was a master of magic research, not offensive magic. Alik decided to give up any further confrontation, thinking he would have to call someone who could verify their identities once he was taken into custody.

That's when it happened.

"It seems those are the ones we're sure of."

"I told you so."

From afar, the sound of noisy voices reached them, and four figures appeared.

"It has to be them. I saw them being ignored when they asked where the Cavalry was earlier. I'm sure."

They were all wearing the same black uniform. But three of the four were so covered in dirt and dust that had it not been for the one clean-dressed among them, one would not have recognized they were in the same uniform.

Alik was staring blankly at their faces when he suddenly recognized one. A pale man with black hair. Trying hard to remember where he'd seen him before, he suddenly recalled.

‘Right. The one who was fighting the noble in the palace! He definitely said he was from the Cavalry!’

Alik did not remember Kanna, who had been behind Yuder with her hood deeply drawn. However, even though he had only seen Yuder briefly, he had left a lasting impression in his memory.

“Excuse me, knights.”

As soon as the Cavalry appeared, the gaze of the Imperial Knights sharpened. They menacingly placed their hands on their sword hilts, ready to draw at any moment. Among them, Kiolle’s face was flushed with anger, as if he were about to explode at any moment.

“Filthy scoundrels. You have a lot of nerve showing up here.”

“Cavalry members have the right to freely roam the grounds of the Imperial Knights. I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

The black-haired man slightly tilted his head with an expressionless face. There seemed to be no intent in his factual statement, but it was enough to further irritate Kiolle.

“We heard that the two of them came looking for our Cavalry, so we came to find them. May I ask why you are detaining them?”

Alik was moved by the fact that someone had finally come to his rescue. However, Kiolle was quite the opposite.

“Shut your nonsense! You came here knowing I was present! Fine. Now that I’ve finally seen with my own eyes that you weren’t expelled, let’s settle this!”

Kiolle roared, but the man remained unruffled. He simply blinked his eyes slowly, as if looking at a stranger.

“Um… I apologize, but when have we met? I can’t seem to remember who you are.”

“…What?”

Could there possibly be a more humiliating and insulting situation?

Alik thought for a moment that Kiolle’s face might explode. The other knights seemed to share the same sentiment, as they all held their breaths and glanced towards Kiolle.

However, seeing the strange expressions on the faces of the man’s companions standing around him, it appeared that Kiolle and the man truly did not know each other.

“You… are saying… you can’t remember me?”

Kiolle stammered, seeming unaware of his own stuttering.

“Was there something memorable? I don’t think there was… Gakane, do you remember?”

The red-haired man referred to as Gakane gave Kiolle and the man a sidelong glance and awkwardly smiled.

“Uh… Yuder. You really don’t remember? That… time when you, uh… did that thing to his sword. And he fell over… And the Commander even came and said something…”

“…Oh. That time. I remember now.”

A flicker of light finally returned to the man’s eyes, which had been dim until he heard the word “Commander.” In contrast, Kiolle’s face paled even more, consumed by extreme anger.

“How dare you insult me in such a way and hope to live? Fine. Draw your sword! I challenge you to a duel!”

“I’m not a knight, so I’m not obliged to accept a duel. Also, this sword is… just a blunt practice sword made of iron.”

The man named Yuder calmly drew his sword slightly from its scabbard. As he had said, it was a worn and old practice sword without an edge.

Thanks to that, Kiolle ended up looking like a fool for recklessly challenging someone wielding a practice sword to a duel without even recognizing his opponent. The knights standing behind him couldn’t bear to look at Kiolle anymore.

But the people standing behind Yuder had no need to hold back their laughter, and they openly shook with laughter. Alik felt regret that he couldn’t join them in their mirth.

‘What an impressive man. To reduce his opponent to a fool with such calm demeanor.’

“That’s right. It’s a waste to use a sword to punish mere insects!”

In the end, Kiolle lost his reason. Instead of a sword, he swung his hand to slap Yuder across the face.

“Yuder!”

Yuder’s companions hurried to intervene. However, Alik felt a sudden strange wind gusting around Yuder at that moment.

“Uh… oh…!”

Kiolle’s body twisted in the wind. He missed his target and swung his arm into thin air. Unable to resist the recoil, he tumbled forward, landing face-first onto the ground.

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Chapter 64

“…”

An awful silence lingered.

Moments later, from the frozen crowd, Thais Yulman, who had been silent until now, burst out laughing for the first time.

“Hahaha! My goodness. The last time I saw something this ridiculous was eight years ago, when some fool vowed to create a spell that would force a monster to dance until it died of exhaustion!”

Shortly thereafter, as if caught up in his laughter, Yuder’s comrades also began to chuckle, one by one.

“Hahaha… hahahahaha!”

Amidst the sea of laughter, Kiolle’s fellow knights hurriedly helped him to his feet. Kiolle had fainted, his head hanging low.

They disappeared without a word, as if marching away in formation. It was a humorous sight, hardly befitting the reputedly most beautiful and honorable knights of the continent - the Imperial Knights of the Orr Empire.

“Yuder, how on earth did you do it? We thought you could only use fire and water!”

“Think of it as my own progress, just as you’ve progressed.”

“Is it something to talk about so easily, having one more element you can use?”

Amid the unending laughter, Yuder, conversing calmly with the redhead, turned his gaze toward Alik. Alik, feeling as if his thoughts were being pierced by those eyes, nervously stammered.

“Hello. Do you, uh, remember us? You only met my master, to be precise……”

“Yes. I remember.”

Luckily, Yuder replied coolly.

“I heard you were looking for the Cavalry. You don’t seem to be invited guests, so may I ask what your business is?”

“Ah, that’s……”

Alik cast a resentful look at his master, who was still laughing heartily. It was about time for him to step in. But the master showed no signs of doing so.

“My master has something very important to say to Duke Peletta, which is why we came suddenly. But the road… uh, it was harder than we thought. Haha……”

“Yes. It is difficult.”

A faint, cool smile flashed across Yuder’s lips and then disappeared. He had noticed Alik cursing the knights who had ignored their request for help.

“Follow me. I’ll guide you.”

Alik was quite surprised, as he had thought Yuder wouldn’t be so compliant in offering help. But Yuder had already turned and was striding ahead.

“Master, that man said he would guide us. Shall we go?”

Alik grabbed the arm of his master, who was laughing so hard that tears were starting to form, and followed behind him.

“Alik. That guy, he’s not an ordinary one.”

Thais murmured low enough for only his disciple to hear as they neared the Cavalry barracks.

“I came to see the stone, but it seems I have one more subject to study.”

“So, they’re downstairs now?”

“Yes.”

After leading the mages from the Pearl Tower to the guest lounge on the first floor of the Cavalry barracks, Yuder went straight up to meet Kishiar alone. Gakein had wanted to accompany him, fearing that Kishiar might be angry, but there was no need. Kishiar was far from angry; instead, he seemed very interested in the situation Yuder had created and resolved.

“Good. I know you wouldn’t act thoughtlessly. Meeting Kiolle Diarca again is nothing but bad luck… Anyway, now that the situation has been explained, let’s move on to the next step.”

Yuder looked at Kishiar, who leaned back comfortably in his chair with a leisurely smile, carefully choosing his words.

“They did not clearly state so, but to my eyes, they are mages. Probably from the Pearl Tower. For such people to visit here, uninvited at this time, and only stating they need to see the Commander without making their purpose clear. They must have come for the Red Stone.”

The old man with a long beard who casually mentioned magic. The disciple who respectfully called such an old man his master -

they perfectly embodied the tradition of one-on-one mentorship typical of mages. If they were court mages, there would be no need to hide their identities, so the only remaining possibility was clear.

Of course, Yuder knew who they were immediately due to his memories from his past life, but he did not tell Kishiar that.

“If that’s your interpretation, then so be it. So what?” Kishiar’s eyes softened as he rested his chin on the hand propped on his armrest.

“How should I deal with the mages who have come for the Red Stone?”

“I think you need to figure out how they knew the stone was here and what they want to do with it. After all, you need to understand their intentions before you can use them.”

“Use them…”

“Even if they came here because of the Tower’s will, in the end, they are mages. ‘Even if the tower crumbles tomorrow due to the magic cast today’…”

“‘If you want to cast, cast it and face death.’… That’s a maxim inscribed at the top of the Pearl Tower.”

That saying was known to have been left by a mage who dedicated his entire life to the magic of moving objects and ultimately tried to pull the moon to the earth hundreds of years ago. His magic failed, but his words remained, etched as a motto that symbolizes the spirit of the entire Pearl Tower.

“So, are you suggesting that we should try to persuade them by appealing to the mages’ greed?”

He didn’t say it directly, but Kishiar immediately understood Yuder’s meaning.

Mages of the Pearl Tower were famous for their fanatical obsession with the magic they were practicing. They didn’t hesitate to engage in all sorts of unethical behaviors for the perfection of magic.

If Thais Yulman had no particular interest in the Red Stone and was forced to come here due to the will of the Tower, he wouldn’t have bothered to leave the palace and even seek out the Cavalry. But he came here in his shabby clothes and endured insults from the Imperial Knights without revealing his identity. Considering his major was researching such things, it could have yielded a good result.

“They did not seem like bad people. I plan to investigate the Red Stone with the help of a few members, including Kanna, but wouldn’t it be better to have more help?”

“Originally, the court mages were going to investigate the stone first. Why should I persuade a mage from the Pearl Tower instead of them?”

“If you trusted them, wouldn’t you have already entrusted the stone to the court mages, regardless of what I said?”

Yuder calmly spoke the most reasonable answer. Satisfaction spread across Kishiar’s face.

“Indeed, my assistant is smart. It’s fortunate that not everyone is as quick-witted as you.”

Yuder had seen in his previous life how sensitive the court mages were to power. It was only natural since those who wanted to gain power rather than improving their magic skills often became court mages.

On the surface, they professed loyalty to the emperor alone, but behind the scenes, they colluded with various nobles and engaged in dirty dealings.

What the current emperor was thinking, one couldn't be sure, but Kishiar certainly couldn't trust them fully. Considering the risk of information leaking, it was much safer to win over a single archmage obsessed with magic research rather than entrust the palace mages. This likely played a part in his easy acceptance of Yuder's suggestion.

"Fine. Let's go down then. Let's see what kind of talent the Pearl Tower has sent us."

Kishiar rose from his seat. Yuder thought he would head straight out of the quarters, but surprisingly, he approached Yuder and peered closely at his face.

"…Commander?"

Yuder instinctively tensed and cautiously questioned.

"You seem to have had no time to wash your face after training. You're a mess."

He took out a handkerchief and wiped Yuder's cheeks and forehead. The fragrance emanating from the handkerchief made his back stiffen for a moment.

Yuder recognized Kishiar's slightly sharp body scent. It had been a faded memory in his mind for a long time. The sudden reality of the scent unsettled him.

"Please… stop."

"We're almost done anyway."

He turned his face to evade, but it was in vain. Kishiar, who followed him till the end and wiped up to his nose, put the handkerchief back in his pocket. His nonchalant behavior left Yuder speechless.

“You could just tell me to wash up. Why do this?”

“What’s wrong with being kind?”

“Why are you putting the handkerchief back? It’s dirty, you should leave it.”

“Don’t be so sensitive. I’m fine.”

Kishiar laughed merrily and patted Yuder’s shoulder. If anyone should act sensitively, it should be the noble Kishiar, not the commoner Yuder. Yuder deeply regretted not washing his face earlier.

——

“You must have had a long journey. Thank you for coming.”

Kishiar, who had descended to where the mages were with Yuder, cheerfully greeted first.

“Are you His Excellency, Duke Peletta?”

“Yes, indeed. However, here, my position as the commander of the Cavalry takes precedence, so please call me that.”

Finally seeing Duke Peletta in person, Alik was stunned once by his beauty, as if witnessing the incarnation of the Sun God, and twice by his seemingly snaky smile.

‘I heard he was a spendthrift, unintelligent, and impulsive, but what’s with these rumors?’

Casually glancing to the side, he noticed no change in Thais's expression.

'Master is something. If you knew the rumors were wrong, you could have told me earlier!'

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Chapter 65

While Alik grumbled internally, Kishiar invited the old mage and his apprentice to take a seat. Yuder stood behind Kishiar, an assistant in his stead. Although Yuder's face was cleaner than before, his attire was still unkempt, yet Kishiar seemed unconcerned with his subordinate's appearance.

Did this signify the grandeur of the Duke, or was it a silent warning to Thais and Alik, stating that they didn't even need to show the slightest courtesy? Alik's mind raced.

It was Thais who spoke first.

"I am grateful, sir, that you personally greet an old man who came uninvited. I am Thais Yulman, a mage from the Pearl Tower. This is my unruly apprentice, Alik Pelgin."

"I am Alik Pelgin, a mage from the Pearl Tower."

After acknowledging the greetings of the two mages, Kishiar gracefully raised his hand towards Yuder.

"This is Yuder Aile, my assistant. I've heard that my assistant had an encounter with both of you at the palace previously. Seeing as we meet again today, it seems like there must be a deep connection."

In reality, Kishiar had been secretly observing while in disguise, but the two mages didn't know that.

"Indeed, sir. If it weren't for Sir Aile, I wouldn't have been able to make it here today. I didn't have the opportunity to express my gratitude earlier. Thank you, Sir Aile."

"I just did what I had to."

Alik was quite surprised by the identity of Yuder, something he couldn't have guessed just by appearances. A young man held a position usually occupied by those with much more experience, and he'd already received a last name. There was indeed justification for his confidence, even in front of nobles.

"Well, considering he knocked out that Knight named Kiolle at once, he's no ordinary skilled person. It's rare to see someone not from the Pearl Tower who can use attribute magic so quickly and simply. Are there many people of that level of skill here? Or is Yuder Aile extraordinary?"

Alik examined Yuder's pale face. The inscrutable cold expression and shadow-draped eyes were a bit intimidating, but considering he'd helped save him and his master, Alik felt a sense of goodwill.

"Thais Yulman. I've heard your name before. You are a renowned elder within the Pearl Tower, currently focused on research. May I ask why you've come here, concealing your name and identity?"

"If you know me, haven't you already guessed my purpose?"

Thais stroked his long beard with a calm smile.

"I heard that you managed to acquire something that no one else could for the past two years. As a researcher of magic, how could I resist coming when I heard the news? I am here to see it."

"So such rumors have spread. Don't you think they are rather exaggerated? I wonder who could have spread such a story all the way to the Pearl Tower."

"Does it matter what it is? The fame of you and the Cavalry has spread throughout the continent. Naturally, everyone will find out. Isn't there a saying that a tongue is the hardest weapon to control in the world?"

Thais Yulman's rhetoric was very cunning. While he didn't hide his eagerness to investigate the Red Stone, he brushed off the issue of how he got the information as if it wasn't important.

A trace of chilliness spread over Kishiard's smiling face, as if he had noticed something.

"His Majesty the Emperor values sincerity above all else when he embarks on a significant task. I do not think it was such a good choice to come here, escaping his sight."

"Commander, isn't it true that, even if everything else was exaggerated, the Red Stone indeed disappeared from its original place? At first, I intended to meet His Majesty the Emperor. However, when I found out that he has long stopped seeing even the envoys from foreign nations, I thought it better to grasp at straws than to wait aimlessly. Wouldn't anyone think the same?"

As Kishiar remained silent at his words, Thais seemed to gain strength and continued speaking honestly.

"I do not mean to boast, but I have devoted myself single-mindedly and earned the title of an elder. No one on this continent can investigate the Red Stone as thoroughly as I can. All this old man desires is the chance to see it even once and research what is hidden inside it. Please do not doubt this. Who sent me here is not important to me. If necessary, I will even write a vow."

"…"

"Commander, isn't it true that you also need someone to thoroughly investigate the stone? Isn't that why we are face-to-face like this?"

'He had confidence from the beginning.'

Yuder quietly speculated as he watched Thais.

‘Thais Yulman must have known that the Emperor and Kishiar wouldn’t completely trust the court mages, so he came running. He believed that someone would eventually need to investigate, and that his skills were the best, so he came with such confidence.’

If the Emperor and Kishiar really wanted to possess the stone, the best course of action would be to accept Thais’s proposal. The old mage offered quite a tempting proposal: he would overlook everything else if only they entrusted him with the research. Now, it was time to see how Kishiar would respond.

“Well, in fact, His Majesty the Emperor once said that it would be better to destroy the stone right away rather than letting the peace of the entire continent shake due to it. And as we all know, we don’t necessarily need to investigate in order to destroy.”

“Are you saying… it was retrieved for destruction?”

Thais’s expression subtly changed for a moment.

“Haha. I didn’t say for sure whether it has been retrieved or not. But if needed, it could be so.”

Various thoughts seemed to flicker in the old magician’s head.

Was Kishiar’s certainty a sign that the Emperor’s side had already completed some investigation of the stone? Did they conclude that the power within the stone was, in fact, trivial? Or was this merely to shake Thais Yulman?

Thais Yulman scrutinized Kishiar’s face meticulously. He could not read any real intentions from his languid smile. However, when he spoke of destruction if necessary, it felt undeniably sincere.

‘The Empire wouldn’t want change… They’d probably think it better to destroy it unless they deem it a power worth risking. It’s a plausible story.’

But even if the stone held no particular power, Thais Yulman desired to see it. The Pearl Tower had ordered him to bring the stone, but Thais wanted to monopolize this golden research opportunity, if possible.

Thinking that his opponent would be the one regretting, he had mustered up courage, but now it seemed he was the one feeling regretful.

Thais Yulman hesitated, then opened his mouth.

“The House of the Four Dukes… I believe they might have a better solution than destruction.”

It was a veiled hint. It implied that among the four ducal houses, someone had leaked information about the Red Stone to the Pearl Tower and Thais Yulman.

‘Or perhaps, it was all of them.’

While Yuder finally watched Thais Yulman play his cards, Kishiar lightly tapped his crossed knee with his finger.

“A better solution, huh? Do you think so too?”

It was a short question, as if asking him to choose between the emperor and the four ducal houses. However, Yulman grasped another implication within it.

A smile spread across his face after a moment.

“Oh dear. I am merely an old mage. Did I not tell you I have no interest in such important matters?”

Kishiar’s tapping finger halted on his knee.

“That’s a pity. I hoped to benefit from the wisdom of a wise elder.”

After saying this, he turned to Yuder and gave him a slightly different smile than before.

“Yuder, please prepare guest quarters for these two.”

“Understood. Should I request the oath from Sir Nathan?”

“You’re always so quick to catch on.” Pleased, Kishiar lightly tapped Yuder’s gloved hand before rising from his seat.

“Heavens… I have no idea what just happened. Would you believe me if I said the conversation between the Duke and Master was harder to understand than an introductory magic textbook? I still have chills.”

Entering the guest room Yuder had prepared, Alik shivered and threw himself onto the bed. He didn’t want to imagine the hidden blades that must have been exchanged in the conversation that had just taken place.

All he remembered was signing the oath with a trembling hand under the terrifying smile of Duke Peletta, and Yuder kindly offering to transfer their luggage from the palace.

“Well, at least we’ve found our destination. Isn’t that good enough?”

“What’s good about it? Why were the rumors about Duke Peletta like that until now?”

Alik shuddered as he remembered Kishiar. The Duke’s smile when he casually questioned Thais at the end had seemed more terrifying than his master’s angry face.

“A young, unripe beast hiding its claws is not a rare event in history. As long as we don’t provoke it, it will leave us alone. We only

need to finish examining the Red Stone, so be careful with your words until then, Alik."

"Do we have to go through all this just for research….."

"If you don't like it, you can go back to the tower."

"Ah, damn it…"

Alik sighed heavily, looking out the window of the guest room.

'Does the Red Stone really exist here? It's unbelievable.'

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Chapter 66

What Alik saw in the Cavalry quarters was utterly different from what he had imagined before arriving. Having heard they were located within the Imperial Knight's territory, he had naturally assumed they were simply using an old, hastily patched-up building. But who could have known that it was instead a place constructed anew from the ground up?

The expensive materials that adorned the solidly constructed building hinted at how grand the expectations and aspirations of its creator must have been.

'The people working in the palace used to chatter that Duke Peletta just made the Cavalry unit for fun after awakening… How could this place possibly have been made for amusement? They can only speak so carelessly because they've never been here!'

If there were a few more people here with skills as extraordinary as Yuder Aile's, they would become a formidable force that no one could dismiss. What on earth was a duke, unable to vie for the imperial throne, doing forming such an ambitious power under the tacit approval of the emperor?

The Orr Empire was a nation famed for its lack of change over a long period of time. Nobody could break the order they had established, neither from within nor without.

However, Alik sighed, contemplating that he and his master might have stepped into this dangerous time where the empire was finally facing the moment of radical change.

—

There was one day left until the end of the seven-day vacation period.

Because he had told Gakane and Kanna to take the day off, it could be considered a true day of rest. Early in the morning, Yuder, to avoid the members who were gradually returning, quietly headed out from the Imperial Knight's territory.

It had been a long time since he had walked the streets in normal clothes, having shed his uniform. Numerous people brushed past Yuder as he meandered through the old, unchanged streets, sparking old memories.

Originally, it was said that common people didn't live within the 7th Wall district. However, as time passed, many people snuck in, settling down, and now it had transformed into a commonplace scenery.

Unlike the other districts where the majority of the buildings were built in balance as if measured, just a little way off the main street in the 7th Wall district, things quickly turned labyrinthine. This was due to the influx of those inhabitants.

Yuder navigated the dizzying streets adeptly and moved forward without any hesitation. As time went by, his surroundings became progressively grimier and darker. The stench that was strong enough to rot one's nose began to waft from between the shadows of the tightly packed buildings.

Eyes filled with anticipation of possibly picking the pockets of naive foreigners who lost their way in the darkness that stretched out like a spider's long legs trailed after him from the alleys. Of course, they quickly gave up when they realized that the new visitor was quite familiar with this slum.

The place where Yuder stopped was in front of a very small pharmacy tucked away in an old alley. It was extremely hard for first-

time visitors to identify the place. The shop itself looked precariously close to collapsing, and the sign was so worn out that it was almost impossible to read the words on it.

However, as Yuder was already aware of what the place was, he did not hesitate and walked right in.

“Get out. Not open for business today.”

A voice as dreadful as a hellish shriek barked from inside the opened door, the harsh tone hardly befitting for a potential customer.

Yuder paid no attention to the clutter that filled the room so densely that neither the walls nor the ceiling could be seen. Instead, his gaze was drawn to the two feet propped up nonchalantly on the counter.

“What are you doing, deaf? I told you we’re not doing business! Get out!”

“I didn’t come to buy medicine.”

“…”

The two casually swaying feet stopped in their tracks at that moment. After a while, someone raised their reclining body and leaned over the counter to reveal their face. It was hard to believe that a man with such an attractive appearance had been lying in this disorganized and filthy space.

“What? Who are you?”

Yuder recalled the past as he looked at the man’s ash-gray hair and deeply furrowed brow. He felt a strange emotion upon seeing that he looked no different from the last time he had seen him in his previous life.

“I came because there’s something I want to hear.”

“…Do you know me? Who are you to come all of a sudden and speak informally and give orders?”

“The Guardian of Luma’s Seven Walls, Enon.”

Yuder’s voice was calm. However, the man’s expression changed significantly upon hearing his words.

“…What did you just say?”

“The Guardian of Luma’s Seven Walls….”

“Wait. Wait a minute, wait a minute.”

The man, who quickly leaped out from behind the counter, covered Yuder’s mouth. His eyes were filled with curiosity, surprise, and wariness.

“Who are you? How do you know? Who told you? Strange… I definitely don’t recognize your face?”

“It was none other than yourself from your previous life.”

Yuder regretted a bit that he couldn’t say that, pointing to the hand that was covering his mouth. The meaning was that if he kept covering it like this, he wouldn’t be able to answer even if he tried.

Although Enon’s expression was still full of skepticism, he finally removed his hand.

Instead of answering his question, Yuder quietly lifted the corner of his mouth.

“I can’t tell you who told me right now. But I swear it’s not information I obtained unfairly. As far as I know, you have to cooperate with anyone who mentions your name. Isn’t that right?”

The look in Enon’s eyes changed completely to one of utter astonishment.

“How… how do you know that too? No matter how I think about it, I don’t know someone like you. How on earth did this happen? Is there something wrong with my head?”

Enon might not have known Yuder, but Yuder knew him. He was the one who helped Yuder, who had been seriously injured while carrying out a secret mission for the Emperor in his previous life and was hiding briefly near the slums.

He was coarse in his speech, but he was more compassionate and kind than he appeared. He knew so much that it was almost mysterious, and he often shared information deeper than most information guilds without hesitation. At that time, he claimed it was because he had heard so much from living in the slums for a long time.

Several years passed in this way, and when a disaster spread across the world and Yuder started chasing the signs of something strange, Enon suddenly disappeared.

Before disappearing, he once mentioned that he thought he needed to leave the capital and find out something. Yuder found the last letter he left in the medicine shop months after he had a hunch about something.

The letter revealed that he was not merely an ordinary person, but a Guardian who had made a pact with the Archmage Luma long ago to protect the seven walls of the capital. It also contained a few more pieces of information related to him.

“‘Believe in my words or not, that’s your choice. But if we meet again and I do not remember you, mention the name ‘Enon,’ Luma’s Guardian. Then I will certainly help you again. I wish you luck on your journey, Yudrain.’“

Enon sometimes audaciously called himself ‘elder brother’ and meddled with Yuder. Even though Yuder had never once called him ‘elder brother,’ his disappearance was included in the fleeting regrets that swept past him just before his death.

“Your head is perfectly fine. And my name is Yuder Aile. Remember it; we’ll be seeing a lot of each other.”

Yuder introduced himself anew, carrying memories from their brief relationship in his past life.

“Even hearing the name, I still don’t recognize it…? And why should I see you frequently?”

Enon frowned and tilted his head.

“Because you’re the only person who can help me now.”

Yuder casually pulled over a chair that was left around and sat down, ignoring Enon’s gaping mouth at his nonchalant attitude.

Enon had the uncanny ability to discern whether a person was lying or not. Thus, from this point on, he needed to speak with the utmost honesty.

“Currently, I need information about those who have held the title of Duke in the past while possessing the castle of La Orr. Even if it’s small, if you have any knowledge, please share it. Especially about Kishiar La Orr, who became a Duke under the same conditions as now.”

“…Why are you already talking as if I’ve agreed to help you? Are you planning some sort of rebellion? If that’s the case, I absolutely won’t assist you.”

“No, it’s not. The information you give me will only be known to me, and I won’t use it anywhere.”

In his past life, Yuder did not highly trust the information Enon shared because he thought it was leaked from some back alley. But this time it was different. Yuder decided to trust Enon more than the information guilds he had used and been betrayed by multiple times in the past.

“It’s very important to me. I can’t ask anywhere else. Please.”

At Yuder’s words, Enon’s eyes twitched. He let out a deep sigh and slouched, then suddenly jumped up and began pacing around the narrow shop.

“This is crazy.”

“…”

“You understand how tricky it is to deal with information related to the imperial family’s history?”

“I do. That’s why I’m asking you.”

“I thought my luck seemed a bit off this morning. So this was it, meeting a crazy guy like you.”

He said this, then continued pacing the shop for a while. Eventually, he knocked over one of the piles of random stuff he had collected, snapped in frustration, and finally stopped.

“…If things were as usual, I would have kicked you out. But I’ll help you, just this once. You did come here in my name.”

Yuder immediately tried to express his gratitude, but Enon cut him off.

“But the information you’re asking for is too dangerous and covers a wide range. Anything related to the imperial family takes a backseat for me, so it’ll take some time to verify.”

“How long?”

“At least three days.”

“Understood.”

Yuder immediately nodded and stood up from his seat. At this, Enon’s expression became strange again.

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Chapter 67

“Leaving so soon?”

“I told you. I can’t afford to stay out too long.”

His vacation time hadn’t yet ended, but staying outside unnecessarily for too long might pique the curiosity of his colleagues or Kishiar. He had thought of some excuses beforehand, but they couldn’t serve as perfect justifications.

“I’ll be back in three days.”

Yuder left the old drugstore, ignoring Enon’s questioning gaze. However, he failed to visit the place again three days later as he had said.

An unexpected event occurred two days later.

“He hasn’t returned yet?”

Yuder was standing behind Kishiar, listening to the report of his members. He was supposed to implement a new training plan he had devised from yesterday. However, there were a few members who had not yet returned despite the end of their vacation, so he had postponed it for a day. The problem was that one of the non-returnees hadn’t sent any news until this very moment.

Kishiar called in a few who were close to the member who hadn’t returned and listened to the stories related to him. The non-returnee’s name was ‘Devran Hartude’, an ordinary member who had never caused any problems before.

All the members who were close to Devran insisted that there was no reason for him to intentionally not return.

“Devran has told us many times how happy he is to have passed the Cavalry test. He isn’t the type to not return without any reason or even send news. There must be something wrong.”

One of the members who used to share a room with Devran clenched his lips and declared so. Kishiar, looking around at the faces of the members who all agreed with the same sentiment, continued his inquiry.

“Did he say anything about his hometown, where he was headed?”

“He mentioned going to see his family. Nothing else comes to mind.”

“I’m the same.”

Most gave the same answer. However, one hesitated for a moment, lost in thought. Kishiar immediately pointed to him with his fingertip.

“Jol, do you remember anything?”

“Well… It’s not something he mentioned this time, but something he said before… It just came to my mind. I don’t know if I should mention it…”

“You can say whatever it is.”

Encouraged by Kishiar’s response, Jol, a member of the Cavalry, overcame his hesitation and began to speak.

“After joining the troop, Devran and I once discussed our backgrounds and hometowns. He said at the time that he wanted to bring his family and relatives he had left in his hometown here as soon as possible.”

“Doesn’t every commoner say that?”

Another member standing next to Jol questioned with surprise.

“Right. But then, Devran said he was worried that the lord might not allow the transfer of residence. When I asked why, he mentioned his younger sibling and suddenly looked pale, closing his mouth saying that he had said something unnecessary. It seemed like there was something going on.”

Devran’s hometown was a small rural village. He wasn’t sure about the life there, but if his hometown was a good place for commoners to live, he wouldn’t have wished to bring his family to the capital.

Yet, for a noble who valued their dignity above all else, refusing the request of a promising Cavalry member from their own territory was unthinkable. It was a place personally established by the Emperor’s younger brother, Duke Peletta, and if handled well, it could forge connections with him. How could the mere relocation requests of a few commoners possibly matter?

Still, if Devran had been concerned about his request being denied, it likely meant he didn’t think highly of the lord ruling his homeland.

“Because of a sibling…”

Kishiar muttered under his breath, rubbing his chin thoughtfully as he considered the words he’d just heard.

“Firstly, we should send a message to the lord of Devran’s homeland, asking about the situation, and send someone to investigate. What do you think, assistant?”

“In the event something has happened to Devran, it might be too late by the time we receive a response. How about sending a

message and dispatching a person at the same time?”

“That sounds better.”

At Yuder’s reply, Kishiar nodded and, as if something had just come to mind, smiled subtly.

“Speaking of which, Yuder, why don’t you take responsibility and handle this?”

“…Are you suggesting me?”

“Who else would be better suited than you, the assistant with the greatest skills among the 330 members?”

Kishiar raised his eyebrows slightly as he asked this question, and all the members present nodded in agreement. How could the Commander himself get involved over something as minor as a member who hadn’t returned from vacation? It seemed appropriate for an assistant like Yuder to handle it.

Yuder, who had thought he wouldn’t be sent because there were only about three weeks left until the deadline for investigating the Red Stone, was slightly taken aback. Still, he quickly composed himself.

‘Well, it’s most likely he’s simply been delayed on his way back. It makes sense to send someone who can handle this quickly.’

Furthermore, there was a high possibility that Kishiar saw this as a suitable opportunity to observe Yuder’s abilities. In his previous life, he had created sudden circumstances where multiple things had to be handled simultaneously to see how Yuder coped. Compared to those instances, this situation was hardly burdensome.

“Leave today without delay. I will leave the number of people you need to your discretion, so choose freely from our ranks.”

“I will follow your command.”

Yuder swallowed a sigh that he didn’t let the others hear. This would affect the training schedule he had planned for the members and the promise he had with Enon, but there was nothing he could do about it.

‘Devran Hartude… I need to find out what kind of guy he was before I select who will accompany me.’

Yuder’s memories of Devran were extremely vague. All he knew was that he didn’t seem to have been in the cavalry for long in his previous life. Therefore, he decided to meet with Steiber, Sul’s deputy commander, to hear information about Devran.

“Oh, Yuder, so you’re going to look for Devran? If you’re the one going, I’m sure it’ll be resolved well… That’s really fortunate.”

Steiber, with his kind face, was very pleased to hear that Yuder had taken on the task of finding Devran. He provided all the information he knew without holding back.

“Devran is from Hartan in the east. His ability is to summon fire, which is quite powerful, but he has had difficulty controlling it.”

He praised Devran’s character as good-hearted, fiery like a power. He added, worried that this personality might have gotten him swept up in some unfortunate incident on his return.

“Steiber. What do you think about the possibility that Devran didn’t come back on purpose?”

“There’s no way. He was never late for training even once. If something happened back home and he thought he wouldn’t be able to return on time, he would have contacted the Cavalry in advance.”

Steiber’s answer was firm. Yuder nodded and committed the information he’d given to memory.

Those who had been close to Devran, like Steiber, all insisted that there was no way he wouldn’t have returned without a reason. It was clear that he had been more than content with his life in the Cavalry, his passion overflowing.

After gathering this information, Yuder decided to select members to join him in searching for Devran.

‘The requirements: someone with good physical strength and agility to travel quickly. Someone with skills that would aid in the search. Someone who would follow my orders without wasting time. And… finally, someone familiar with the geography and customs of Hartan or the eastern region.’

The person with the most useful skills for the search was Kanna, but Yuder had decided against bringing her. He wanted her to focus on her training while he was away.

After considering the remaining criteria, he found few suitable candidates. After much thought, Yuder wrote the names of his selected members on a piece of paper to report to Kishiar.

“Gakane Bolunwald. Jimmy Ocker. Hm. Are those two really enough?”

“Yes.”

Kishiar, who received the paper from Yuder, could not hide his surprise at the only two names written on it. However, Yuder had no intention of adding more people.

Gakane was more familiar with Yuder’s personality and style than anyone, and his shadow clone was perfect for moving and communicating without attracting the attention of others. As for

Jimmy Ocker, despite being a young boy, his knowledge of the local geography and customs, being from the East, would be a great help while also not drawing suspicion.

“Gakane, maybe. But Jimmy Ocker is still a kid, isn’t he?”

“He may be young, but isn’t it you, the commander, who saw him as a capable member of the squad? From what I’ve observed of Jimmy so far, I judge that he can handle a mission of this magnitude.”

If the mission involved killing or something that wasn’t good for emotional education, Yuder would have excluded Jimmy. But this mission’s purpose was a search. During their training, Yuder had witnessed firsthand just how talented an Awakener Jimmy was.

Jimmy knew the importance of the opportunity given to him. The boy was always mature, had never whined about missing his parents even during training that would make adults struggle.

Considering that noble boys who entered the Imperial Knights at a young age often gave up on the path despite receiving countless privileges, Jimmy’s qualities stood out.

“I assume both have agreed to accompany you on the mission.”

“Of course.”

Just before reporting to Kishiar, Yuder called Gakane and Jimmy to explain the mission and ask if they were willing to go with him. Gakane accepted readily, and Jimmy, overwhelmed with excitement, couldn’t hide his youthful emotion as he vowed to be of help.

“Alright. Then I’ll trust and leave it to you.”

Kishiar nodded and folded the paper again.

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“I have just sent a letter to Lord of Hartan regarding Devran’s whereabouts. If there are any changes once I receive a response, I will send you a carrier pigeon. You should also take one with you, in case something unexpected occurs and you need to contact me.”

“I understand.”

“Oh, and wait a moment.”

Yuder, who had turned to leave, halted and looked back. Kishiar was staring thoughtfully at a piece of parchment.

“Do you have further instructions?”

“Yuder, you are yet to manifest your second gender, correct?”

“…Yes, that’s correct.”

Yuder was momentarily taken aback at the unexpected question about the second gender that sprung from Kishiar’s lips.

“That Gakane Bolunwald accompanying you is an Alpha Awakener, am I correct?”

“That’s what I’ve heard.”

What on earth was Kishiar La Orr trying to say? Unable to control his facial expression due to the tension, it hardened unknowingly.

“There might be one more thing you should be mindful of. It could be a misunderstanding, but we’ve received a report that there seem to be signs of a second gender manifesting in Jimmy Ocker.”

“You mean, Jimmy…?”

“I’m not certain. There’s still a lot unknown about the signs of second gender manifesting. Even if manifesting signs appear, it doesn’t necessarily mean his second gender will manifest immediately.”

“Ah… I see.”

Yuder nodded feebly, feeling his anxiety and alertness cool down at once. He felt foolish for having been so tensed up.

“Even if there are signs, it’s just a slight fever. It doesn’t seem likely that the kid will manifest, but it won’t hurt to be cautious.”

“I understand.”

He wondered whether it would be better not to take Jimmy with him after all, but hesitated as he remembered the boy’s extremely happy face. Yuder decided that he would pay more attention to Jimmy.

‘After all, whether it’s Gakane or Jimmy, it’s the same thing for me to handle.’

While he was thinking that Gakane would feel quite wronged if he knew, Kishiar studied Yuder’s face and continued.

“So far, there have been no cases of a second gender manifesting within the division, but after receiving that report, I felt that it was wise to prepare related regulations in advance, as you suggested.”

Yuder blinked, feeling a strange sense of unfamiliarity.

“…Ah, yes.”

“All the regulations related to the Cavalry should be finalized soon, so check them when you return. Once they’re announced,

they'll be hard to change."

"I understand."

"Once the regulations are in place, that will be the start of something new. I plan to propose a law related to Awakeners in the Imperial Law and support related research. If we hide the disadvantages in advance and show the benefits, it'll make things easier in the future. You should brace yourself for becoming busier."

In his previous life, Yuder had gone through a lot of trouble to push through regulations and laws related to the second gender, against the opposition of greedy nobles.

Back then, there were hardly any scholars conducting proper research on the abilities and physical changes of the Awakeners, and it was nearly impossible for the leader of the Cavalry, who came from a commoner background, to correct misconceptions and prejudice alone.

A single Kishiar presence was all it took to swiftly shift everything around him, as he held his position as commander. Of course, starting the Cavalry immediately had been advantageous, but if Kishiar hadn't envisioned a future beyond Yuder's proposal, things would not have moved so rapidly.

He couldn't change what had already happened, but what if he could have done this earlier?

With a deep conviction that his latest decision hadn't been mistaken, Yuder respectfully bowed his head.

—

Afterwards, Yuder immediately left the cavalry, taking Gakane and Jimmy with him. This time, without the assistance of the Pearl Tower mages like before, they had to ride ordinary horses.

“We’re planning to make the journey as quickly as possible, so rest time will be minimal, and we won’t be looking for lodgings at night. We’ll also need to change horses multiple times, so follow along well.”

“Understood.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ve ridden here on my own when I came to take the Cavalry test.”

Jimmy answered confidently, a determined expression on his face.

“On your own? Impressive. Did you run into any trouble?”

“There was a thief who followed me trying to steal my money. Of course, once I split a rock with my sword, he vanished in terror.”

Jimmy chuckled, fondling the small sword at his waist in response to Gakane’s question. They all currently carried training swords since Kishiar was in the process of preparing individual weapons for each member. But even with these, they were competent enough to show their skills, and no one complained.

‘He doesn’t look feverish…’

Yuder watched Jimmy happily riding his horse, recalling the statement about him possibly manifesting his second gender. The most common physical change before the second gender manifested was a fever lasting several days.

Of course, it differed for each person. Some had different symptoms, others had no precursor symptoms at all and manifested the second gender suddenly. Yuder had been the latter.

‘I wasn’t much different at the time of my manifesting… If it’s the same as before, he doesn’t have much time left.’

The sudden manifesting without any prior symptoms had drastically altered his life. This time, he planned to prepare as much as possible to avoid going through the same ordeal.

“Gakane. Keep a close eye on Jimmy during the journey.”

While Jimmy was a little ahead, Yuder moved closer to Gakane, whispering in a low voice as they rode side by side.

“Huh? Something happened?”

“The Commander mentioned that the boy is showing some symptoms of second gender manifestation. I might not be able to discern it because I’m a beginner, but you’d likely be better at it.”

“Oh, really? The commander said that?”

Gakane’s eyes widened as he looked at Jimmy’s back.

“I don’t sense anything yet… But okay, I’ll keep an eye on him.”

“If you sense something, let me know immediately.”

A small cage, no bigger than his palm, hung beside Yuder’s saddle. Inside, a pigeon clung tightly to a small perch, seemingly unperturbed by the rocking motion. This was Yuder’s means of communication.

Considering that even Gakane didn’t sense anything, the chance of Jimmy’s manifestation seemed exceptionally low, but one never knew.

If Jimmy were to manifest as an Alpha, it wouldn’t be a concern. But if he manifested as an Omega, there was a chance that Gakane, being an Alpha, could be affected.

‘Well… I will just have to keep a closer eye to ensure that doesn’t happen.’

Even if such an event occurred, it was enough to isolate it.

While it might have been different if it was Kishiar, who was concealing an immense power that could not even be fully comprehended, Yuder was confident that he could easily isolate individuals of Gakane and Jimmy's caliber alone.

'In swordsmanship, awakener power, and divine power… Maybe it's a blessing that there aren't two of these monstrous individuals who may be hiding something else.'

Even knowing Kishiar's power to some extent, Yuder could not guess where the limit of his abilities lay.

Yuder shook his head, casting away the unnecessary thoughts that had come to him.

'Let's focus on what's right in front of us.'

They had ridden horses relentlessly throughout the day. Whenever a horse was exhausted, they quickly borrowed a replacement from a nearby village.

The pass that Kishiar provided before their departure had been incredibly useful. They were treated like messengers carrying the emperor's decree, allowing them to easily borrow horses from any village, whether from the local guards or the steeds raised by the lords.

The pace would have been unbearable for an ordinary person, but it was lighter than the regular training the Awakeners like them received. Even Jimmy did not show any signs of fatigue.

"Jimmy. Your hometown is near Devran's, right? How close is it exactly?"

While riding, Gakane asked Jimmy various questions related to the Eastern region. Jimmy's parents owned a quite well-known shop in the Eastern region, and so he had picked up a lot of useful information.

"It shouldn't take more than a few hours? Quite a few people used to come to the village where I lived from Hartan to shop."

Jimmy disparaged Hartan as a very small, insignificant village. It barely had any shops, and the market did not flourish, so the inhabitants had to go to other villages to buy anything.

"I heard the lord there is quite old. He doesn't take much interest in his subjects and has a married daughter and two sons, if I remember correctly."

"Who's next in line for the lordship once the current lord passes away?"

"The eldest will definitely inherit it. Since the eldest daughter is married, perhaps she will come and take over?"

"The atmosphere is quite different from the South."

Gakane, who was from the South, murmured thoughtfully.

"Where I come from, the youngest inherits everything the parents owned until the end, be it titles or anything else."

"Wow, that's even more strange. Then what happens to the older siblings?"

"The older ones receive more support while growing up and often establish themselves independently. But what does the youngest have except for the parents? So isn't it right for the elder siblings to yield?"

At Gakane's words, Jimmy opened his mouth and tilted his head.

"Uh… when you put it that way, it does seem to make sense?"

"Haha. Come visit sometime. You'll be surprised."

"I'll do that."

Watching the two who looked like close brothers, Yuder surveyed the surroundings. As they had chosen the fastest route, they had strayed from the safe trade route, making the surroundings extremely dark and eerily quiet. However, Jimmy was the one who had told them this was the quickest way.

'Judging from the well-trodden ground and the surrounding conditions, this seems to be a frequently used path. But it's a bit odd that it's so deserted. It feels as if something's about to jump out…'

"Halt, you scoundrels!"

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Chapter 69

“Halt, you scoundrels!”

Just at that moment, a few people stepped out to block the path as if they’d read Yuder’s thoughts, shouting out in defiance.

“How dare you tread on the path we linger! You should be ready to pay the toll.”

“Ah, right. It’s them. The ones I encountered when I came for the Cavalry test.”

Jimmy, who had been chattering with Gakane, looked at their faces and whispered lightly.

“It seems there is no change even after some time.”

His tone was as if he was not dealing with bandits, but greeting familiar faces from a long lost home town. The bandits, thinking it odd that the three seated calmly on their horses were not startled, lit their torches and approached.

“What, did these kids freeze in fear? Why aren’t they saying anything…”

One of the bandits with a rough face scarred from knife wounds approached and, seeing Jimmy on his horse, suddenly closed his mouth.

“What’s up, why’d you stop talking? As I was saying about the toll…”

Another bandit who followed suit stopped mid-sentence as well.

“What’s the matter? What’s wrong… You, you are!”

“Hello. You’re still here, I see.”

Jimmy rubbed his nose as he greeted them from atop his horse. Of course, the recipients of the greeting did not appreciate his cheerful salutation.

“Bloody hell. It’s the kid who said he was going to take some kind of test last time!”

“You, you… don’t tell me you failed? Is that why you came back? Dammit!”

“No, I passed, of course. I have two other companions here with me besides myself.”

Jimmy pointed at Yuder and Gakane with a smile. Only then did the bandits seem to realize the existence of the other two, their eyes darting in shock and fear.

“Don’t tell me, those two are also… like you, cutting rocks with their swords…?”

“Ah. They are far more impressive than I am. How can you compare them to me, who is merely 12 years old?”

“Damn it, retreat. Retreat! Run!”

Just as Jimmy finished speaking, one of the bandits closest to them started running, waving his hands wildly. The other bandits, as if they had been waiting for such an order, scampered away without even looking back.

A sudden wind picked up on the dark mountain path, and the torch held by one of the bandits was hastily extinguished. The

remaining bandits, who were further away, seemed to notice something was up and promptly vanished into the shadows.

“They fled already, and we didn’t even do anything yet. What should we do?”

Jimmy murmured, looking worried as he watched their swift departure.

“Indeed. Hmm. Should we chase them?”

Gakane also turned to Yuder, a hint of uncertainty in his eyes. Normally, they would have given chase, but they were currently on an urgent mission to find Devran Hartude.

“What do you think, Yuder?”

“Summon the shadow clone to chase. Block the path and catch as many as possible.”

“Got it.”

At Yuder’s order, the shadow clone of Gakane sprung forth from under his horse, darting in the direction the bandits had fled at an incredible speed. It moved so fast it was incomparable to a human running.

“Jimmy. Since when have bandits been lurking around here?”

As Gakane’s shadow clone was carrying out its task, Yuder, with an impassive face, asked Jimmy. Lost in thought, Jimmy frowned slightly.

“Hmm. I’m not quite sure. In fact, there were many people who used to take this path until last year. But when I told my parents that I would be going alone to take the Cavalry test, they absolutely forbade me from going this way. They said it was dangerous

because bandits had claimed the route and were demanding a toll. But it's much quicker than any other way, so… hehe."

"So, you're saying they've been here for at least a year."

"Why? Is that a significant point?"

Gakane, manipulating his shadow, tilted his head and turned his gaze towards Yuder. Thanks to the grueling training he had been doing, he was now able to control his shadow with a fair amount of ease. Yuder opened his mouth quietly, directing his words at both Gakane and Jimmy.

"Have you two not noticed it yet?"

"Noticed what?"

"I don't understand what you're saying."

"There're Awakeners among those bandits."

"…What? Oh no."

The moment Gakane opened his mouth in surprise, a thud and a scream echoed from afar. It seemed he had accidentally used his shadow control too forcefully.

"Awakeners? Then why did they run away after seeing us? They wouldn't have needed to. No, more importantly, Yuder, how did you know that?"

"Torchlight. Wind. Darkness."

"Huh?"

"Ah, I see. I understand now!"

At Yuder’s enigmatic words, Jimmy immediately brightened and exclaimed.

“They approached us with a torch, even though they hadn’t been carrying one from the beginning. And when they ran away, the wind suddenly blew! And there’s no moon or stars visible in the sky!”

They were all correct. Only then did Gakane look up at the sky, surprised at the pitch-black darkness where neither moon nor stars could be seen.

“I didn’t realize. How did this happen? Despite the sky being so dark, I didn’t find it strange because I could see my surroundings so clearly.”

Even this acceptance of the situation could be due to someone’s ability. Yuder, swallowing his final answer, watched as Gakane’s shadow clone handled three bandits who were struggling in the shadow’s grasp.

“Let me go! Let me go!”

“Damn. I told you I had a bad feeling for the past few days and suggested we stop our operations until the boss returns, didn’t I?”

“Shut up, you stinky bastard. Your butt is poking my face!”

“I’ve been telling you over and over that I’ve had a bad feeling since the fire the other day!”

“So what does that have to do with us!”

Yuder dismounted his horse to look down at the bandits, who were cursing and struggling. Gakane and Jimmy followed suit.

“Gakane.”

“Yeah.”

Just hearing his name was enough; Gakane instantly understood Yuder's intention. As soon as the shadow clone released the bandits, the three men collapsed on the ground, screaming in pain.

"Ouch! Ah, my back!"

"Damn it, if you're going to kill us, do it quickly! But you won't be able to get anything from us! Our boss will avenge us!"

As the noisy bandits yelled out, Yuder took a closer look at their faces. In the dim light of the flickering torch, he hadn't noticed it before, but they were all younger than he had initially thought. Only one of them was carrying a knife.

If they were the type to make a living from such activities, they wouldn't have been so poorly armed. Yuder's curiosity about their true identities grew stronger.

"Why are Awakeners here, acting like bandits, extracting tolls?"

"What's it to you? What do you know? Stop blabbing."

Instead of answering, Yuder conjured a flame in his palm. Though small, the threatening flame flared brightly, illuminating their surroundings and drawing everyone's gaze. Fear and alarm flashed across the faces of the three bandits.

"Yuder, you can now summon flames without a sword?"

Unable to hide his amazement, Gakane whispered in his ear.

"With the wind, with the fire… How does your ability keep developing like this?"

The truth was, he had been capable of doing it all along. But had he said that, Gakane would surely have asked why he'd kept it a secret. The only answer Yuder could provide, as before, was…

“…Training with you guys has improved me somewhat.”

“Somewhat? You call this somewhat?”

“Hey, can we just talk this out? Yes, we made a mistake in not recognizing who we were dealing with and asking for a toll. But we’re not like that, really. We’re good guys. We’ve never killed anyone, we just took a tiny, tiny toll when people passed through! Don’t forget you’re the one who brought us here when we did nothing!”

Thankfully, one of the bandits raised his voice, preventing Gakane from asking further. Feeling slightly grateful to the bandits, Yuder approached them. As he did, fear heightened on the bandits’ faces.

“I just want an answer to my question.”

“If… if we answer, you won’t kill us, right?”

“Keep your mouth shut when talking to the enemy…”

Yuder extended his other hand and summoned a gust of wind. The bandit who had tried to talk was silenced by the fierce wind that hit his jaw, closing his mouth in an instant.

Witnessing Yuder simultaneously wielding wind and fire, the bandits’ eyes widened in terror.

“Let me ask you again. Why are people who wouldn’t normally do this sort of thing acting as bandits here? Including Awakeners.”

“…”

“Answer me.”

“I’ll answer that if you let my brothers go.”

“Boss!” The bandits turned around in unison and cried out. Yuder looked at a man who had appeared out of nowhere.

He was a remarkably handsome young man, too young to be believed to be a bandit leader. However, the left half of his face was horribly scarred, and his left eye had lost its color, with the pupil dilated, inducing a feeling of fright rather than his inherent handsomeness.

Among the people Yuder had met, this man, with a starkly different impression from the most beautiful man Kishiar, left an unforgettable impact.

“Did you start all this? Leading them into this mess?”

“No. The sequence of events is the reverse.”

The man answered surprisingly calmly.

“They first fled from the tyranny of a noble, and then they met me.”

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Chapter 70

“Tyranny?”

“Well, isn’t that a common tale? So common that it hardly needs explaining.”

As the man spoke, the bandits surreptitiously rose from their seats. When Yuder did not bother to stop them, they swiftly ran to hide behind the man’s back.

“Boss, how did the mission go?”

“I can’t make head nor tail of what’s going on. Knights showing up, fires breaking out, and now these characters… something wicked must be afoot.”

Knights and fire. Amid their whispered conversation, Yuder picked out these words that tickled his curiosity, causing him to frown.

“What do you mean by ‘knights’ and ‘fire’?”

“You folks, you came here from the capital, didn’t you? Looking for someone.”

The bandit leader replied with a counter-question. Yuder noticed a strange energy simmering within the man’s intact right eye and hesitated momentarily before nodding.

“That’s correct. Judging from your words, you seem to know something?”

“I wouldn’t say ‘know,’ exactly. I do recall a man dressed like you all visiting a nearby village a few days ago.”

“Devran.”

Gakane muttered in a low voice.

“We don’t know his name. But three days ago, a sudden fire broke out in that village. By the time it was finally extinguished after half a day, half the village, including the lord’s castle, had disappeared.”

“Fire?”

Yuder recalled that Devran’s power was fire-related. An uneasy premonition swept over him, and a mysterious smile emerged on the bandit leader’s face, as if to underline his foreboding.

“The man was captured on the scene as a suspect and was locked up in prison. I went over there briefly to examine the cause of the fire and the situation in the area, and heard stories related to him. Everyone is buzzing that his execution is imminent.”

“Could Devran really have…? What should we do?”

Jimmy, at a loss for what to do, turned to Yuder. What he had assumed to be a simple reconnaissance mission had suddenly escalated into an alarming crisis.

Yuder, suppressing his shocked expression better than Gakane and Jimmy, calmed his racing mind. Considering the situation, it seemed highly likely that Devran was the arsonist the bandit leader spoke of. However, nothing could be certain until he verified it personally.

Moreover, the oddly submissive and friendly demeanor of the bandit leader did not sit well with him.

“What about the knights you lot were chatting about?”

“Ah, that’s nothing significant. Just yesterday, knights in shining armor passed through here. My brothers, who intended to collect a toll, were completely taken aback at the sight of them, as it was their first encounter with such distinguished guests. However, it turned out that they were not here because of the fire, but for their internal knightly training. They passed through here to a mountain next to the village where the fire broke out.”

The bandit leader casually shrugged as he answered.

It was a tradition for renowned knight orders to conduct their training in remote rural areas. It appeared that a portion of them had come here.

“Well, that’s all I know. Anything else you want to ask?”

The leader’s soft gaze landed on Yuder’s face. Yuder felt there was something odd about his eyes but was frustrated as he could not yet pinpoint what it was.

“You and your henchmen, you plan on being half-baked bandits here indefinitely?”

“Half-baked bandits, is that how it appears to you?”

The man retorted in an exaggerated tone, letting out a low chuckle.

“I was actually considering leaving this place soon. I can’t live in the empire anymore, with my criminal record and all. There’s no other way.”

“You make it sound like you had no other choice.”

“Because I genuinely had no choice.”

A smile surfaced on the leader’s face, chilling the observer. It was because his contorted, motionless left side of the face, and his cruel yet beautiful right side composed a disconcerting harmony.

“None of the brothers here believe they’ve committed a grave enough crime to warrant leaving their hometown. Do you think picking someone’s pocket on the road warrants death?”

“What nonsense.”

As Gakane sharply interjected, the leader’s right eye turned toward him. The gaze was unbelievably soft.

“All my brothers were ostracized, falsely accused, and chased away merely for having awakened their abilities. Granted, we had to leave where we were living and ended up like this, but we have our own rules and conscience. Unlike those who drove us away.”

The leader’s voice was low and gentle. But at the same time, it held an odd strength. Yuder began to wonder what his power could be.

‘He probably wouldn’t tell me even if I asked.’

“Are you one of those who was driven out?”

“Me? Ha-ha. Maybe I am, maybe I’m not.”

“Do you think we’ll just sit back and watch you guys leave?”

Gakane cut in, and the leader tilted his head.

“Then what else can you do?”

Gakane’s eyebrows twitched, as if he hadn’t expected the leader to retort that way.

“What?”

“I’ve given you all the necessary information. If you don’t find the person you’re looking for right now, that person will soon be executed. Yet, you have time to catch small-time thieves like us? Ha-ha. There’s a priority in everything, brother. If you try to catch us first, we’ll resist with all our might. You can’t catch two rabbits at once.”

“Why am I your brother?”

“If we have the same power, aren’t we all brothers, if not sisters?”

Not making any sense, this guy must be crazy. Yuder read such thoughts from Gakane’s eyes, which turned to him.

‘…Definitely cunning. He figured out why we’re here in such a short time and played it this way.’

Moreover, the fact that the leader wasn’t wrong provoked Yuder’s wariness even more.

Yuder glanced at the leader’s face for a moment, then exhaled briefly. If he used all his power here, he could capture those in front of him. But it was clear that it wouldn’t end there, not knowing where the bandits’ hideout was.

As they said, they were small-time thieves, for now.

‘And they don’t show hostility towards us.’

“Are you angry? Or surprised? It’s nice to finally see some change in that icy expression of yours.”

The leader, noticing the slight change in Yuder’s expression, asked with a laugh.

“I was just thinking.”

“Thinking?”

“How many days do you estimate it would take to solve this matter, return, and round you all up?”

“…”

His voice was soft, but the implications were as chilling as a well-honed blade. The bandits who had been lurking behind their leader and watching the proceedings jumped back with a start when their eyes met Yuder’s. They instinctively felt that his words were not in jest.

“…Ha, ha. Look at that. We have a formidable brother amongst us today.”

“I have no brother like you.”

“That’s it, Yuder! Way to go!” Gakane clenched his fist and cheered silently, his face beaming with satisfaction.

“Shouldn’t there be a comeback if there is a departure? We never harm the innocent. My brethren, at my request, do not lay hands on those who share our powers. We are the losers who have lost everything for the past two years, and all that’s left for us is to flee and survive. Even so, you want to arrest us?”

His tongue, soft as a velvet snake, stirred guilt that lay dormant. Jimmy appeared to be moved by his words, his face grimacing as if he were about to cry.

But who could vouch that his words were true? As long as it was unclear what truths and lies he hid within his cunning words, it was impossible to believe everything he said.

Yuder Aile had seen too many scenes play out to be swayed by such sentimental manipulations.

Yuder stood, blocking Jimmy’s view, and spoke.

“If I were you, I’d use the time you’re wasting on wordplay to flee further. Don’t misconstrue your priorities. It seems that my priorities might change at any moment.”

At Yuder’s fierce words, the leader’s eyes widened a bit, followed by a burst of laughter.

“Ha, ha, ha.”

“Le, leader, let’s go.”

“Why do you keep provoking him? He’s not ordinary.”

“You go first.”

The leader quietly commanded the bandits who tried to hold him back. His voice, following his laughter, was both warm and chilling.

“Huh?”

“I think I have something more to say to these people.”

“Wh, what do you mean? How can we go somewhere without you? How can….”

“I can catch up later. Go back and tell Ersi to leave first. I’ll be right there.”

“Leader…!”

The bandits wore confused expressions, but after a moment, they nodded. Despite their lack of understanding, their obedience suggested that their leader had their absolute trust.

“We’ll wait for you, so make sure to come, leader!”

As the bandits called out desperately and disappeared, the leader, who had lightly waved his hand at them, turned his body and

looked at Yuder. Despite being left alone, his gaze was remarkably relaxed.

“Thank you for not capturing my brethren.”

“There’s no need to catch the tail when you can go for the head.”

Hearing Yuder’s reply, the leader smirked, his left eye gleaming with an inscrutable light in the darkness.

“So, what is it that you want to say to us?”

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“So, what is it that you wish to tell us?”

“I propose a collaboration. I will guide and assist you, and in return, you stop pursuing my brethren.”

“We refuse.”

Yuder’s response was cold and swift. Despite the man’s purported sacrificial stance for his subordinates, Yuder didn’t sense a shred of noble determination or the caution of a negotiator from him. And why should he accept the proposal of a seemingly tricky fellow without a compelling reason?

Nevertheless, despite the chilly refusal, the man merely tugged at one corner of his lips, showing no signs of defeat or despair.

“Rather blunt. But that’s to be expected if you’re still unfamiliar with the obstinacy and arrogance of the Eastern nobles. Even if you were on an imperial mandate, it wouldn’t be easy here. How fast do you think you can achieve your goal among yourselves? In my opinion, it seems impossible.”

“Do you know something more?”

“If you’re curious, accept my proposal.”

“…”

“There will be no harm to you, I promise.”

Even in this unfavorable situation, his audacity clearly stemmed from a confidence in something.

If it had been up to Yuder, he would have thrashed the man soundly and forced the truth out of him, but this tactic worked with some and not with others. And, unfortunately, Yuder's instinct told him that this man would not be swayed by such an approach.

'If Kishiar was here instead of me…'

Yuder suddenly thought of the absent Kishiar. Kishiar might have left this man to his devices, just to see what he would do out of pure curiosity. That was his way.

His method was risky, but it had definite advantages. When confident in superior power, there was no better way to obtain information.

'And this mission is an exploration mission. It has always been my weak point.'

Yuder made a decision. Whatever abilities the man in front of him might have, Yuder did not sense that he was stronger. If it was within tolerable limits, it might be okay to mimic Kishiar just once and follow the man's lead.

"Fine."

"Yuder?"

Gakane was startled by the short agreement that followed a lengthy silence and called Yuder's name. He had naturally expected Yuder to refuse the man's proposal. Yuder gestured to reassure him before continuing.

"Do as you wish. You'd probably follow us anyway, even if we refused."

"You've caught on. You're right."

The man with the odd scar smiled calmly and nodded.

“But before that, tell me the real reason why you’ll try to follow us and what the Eastern nobles are hiding.”

“Impatient, aren’t we?”

“If I don’t like the preliminary information, I’ll arrest you on the spot and turn you over to the guards.”

“You seem to have done quite a bit of threatening. Fine. Mutual trust is important, after all.”

With those words, the man raised his hand lightly, swirling the air.

Suddenly, the atmosphere around them changed dramatically as if a veil had been lifted, revealing the true sky. Beneath the brightly shining moon and stars, a peaceful mountain landscape appeared. A new horse that had not been visible before was quietly tied to a tree, grazing on the grass.

The man effortlessly loosed the reins of the bound horse and climbed upon it. Everyone was unable to contain their astonishment at such a natural display.

“The sky has suddenly cleared! The horse too… Is this that man’s power?”

“Little brother is smarter than he looks.”

The man answered in a low voice, understanding Jimmy’s question, whispered to Yuder, loud and clear.

“Exactly as you said. This is indeed my power.”

“…An illusion?”

Yuder asked quietly. The man nodded, a gleam passing over his seemingly ordinary eyes.

“Yes. It’s not as impressive as your abilities, but it has various uses. Thanks to this power, despite my appearance, I can be free anywhere and quickly notice when guests like you arrive.”

His explanation was ambiguous, but they could guess what he meant. His illusionary ability exceeded merely hiding his grotesque appearance, it was exceptional enough to cover an entire area and detect those who intruded upon it.

Yuder had met a few illusion-casters in his past life. However, their abilities were not as exceptional as the man before him. He wondered if the individuals possessing such a level of skill had met an early death while hanging out with bandits in his previous life.

“So, you were so confident because you thought you could escape anytime. Even knowing what your ability is, it would be difficult to detect it… troublesome.”

Gakane also seemed to understand the hidden intent in the man’s words, murmuring with a grimace on his face.

“Now, let’s discuss the details while on our way. It’s not far to the village, but it would be best to get there as soon as possible.”

At the man’s suggestion, Yuder quietly climbed onto a horse. Gakane and Jimmy also mounted horses. They followed the leisurely advancing man, without letting their guard down.

“Among my brothers, there was one originally in charge of visiting the village to keep tabs on the situation and buy food supplies. However, some time ago, this brother headed to the village as usual but didn’t return. The other brothers thought he had run away with the money for the food, but I didn’t think so.”

The voice of the scarred man was surprisingly clear, audible even amidst the rustling wind in the dark and the noise of the horses' hooves against the ground.

"That brother was surely caught. But I couldn't save him until now because I didn't know where he was imprisoned. Not until the person you are looking for came here."

"What does that have to do with it?"

Jimmy bravely frowned and asked his question.

"The old lord and the couple who had visited to receive their title early died in a fire that day. Despite such a big incident, the remaining two sons have yet to report it to the capital. The whole village is buzzing that the man you're looking for will soon be executed, but no one knows where he's imprisoned. His family members also disappeared somewhere after that day, but no one talks about it. Don't you think that's strange?"

"…Does it mean that someone deliberately confined them somewhere and is trying to quietly bury the incident?"

When Yuder asked curtly, the man turned to look back at him.

"In the east, they respect the House of Duke Diarca more than the emperor."

His answer flowed out, seeming a bit irrelevant.

"Did you know that ever since rumors spread that the recent Emperor had his younger brother form a Cavalry, persecutions against the Awakeners have intensified in the East? That there has been an increase in cases where Awakeners of commoner origin, possessing notable abilities, were suddenly framed and unjustly imprisoned? No one knows where they've gone."

“I haven’t heard of such things happening around here before I left for the test! Of course, unlike the capital, there were many people here who were afraid of the Awakeners…”

“Jimmy.”

Yuder called out Jimmy’s name curtly, compelling him to close his mouth. But the man had already turned his attention to Jimmy.

“Just because you’re from here, it doesn’t mean you know everything. Especially a young boy like you, your exposure to information is limited. But were your parents also like that?”

At the man’s words, Jimmy’s expression changed instantly.

“What do you mean?”

“Usually, no matter how strong they are, they wouldn’t send a young child alone to such a distant place. But what if they thought it was more dangerous to stay here than going to the capital.”

His low voice sent a strong ripple through everyone’s minds.

“Was it the little brother’s decision to take the Cavalry test? Or was it instigated by the parents’ suggestion? What did they say to do if you failed the exam? Did they tell you to come right back? If it were me, I would have asked someone I know to look after you, and told you to stay there for a while.”

“…”

Yuder read the shock in Jimmy’s open mouth and trembling eyes. It suggested that the man’s conjecture wasn’t too far from the truth.

“I’m not lying. After I came here, in a few months, the East became increasingly hard for people like us to live. Many of my brethren have fled here like that.”

Yuder thought about the man's mention of the 'East, where the influence of the Diarca Ducal House is stronger than the Emperor.'

The history of the repeated rivalry and alliance between the Imperial House of the Orr Empire and the Four Ducal Houses was exceedingly long. When the imperial authority was strong, the power of the ducal houses weakened, and vice versa.

In his past life, the Emperor Yuder served was a foster son of the Diarca Ducal House, so he did not antagonize the ducal houses. But what about the current Emperor?

If Kishiar had judged that the power of the Cavalry created was beneficial to the Emperor, the Four Ducal Houses would have worked to obstruct it.

Could the sudden arrest of Devran, a member of the cavalry, here be related to that? He would have to meet Devran to be sure, but it seemed a high probability.

'In my previous life, there was no general vacation at this time, and Devran didn't disappear, so I couldn't have known that such a thing was happening in the East.'

"I think there's a high chance that the one you're looking for is being held in the same place as my brother, or at least knows something that could be a clue."

The man finished his story saying he had followed Yuder and the Cavalry members for that reason. Yuder felt that he wasn't lying, but he didn't let down his guard.

The cold, chilling gaze that did not hide even when he called everyone with the same power a brother, was not to his liking. Was his reason for taking the risk to join them really just because of his comrades?

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Yuder’s gaze drifted towards the small birdcage hanging next to his horse. It seemed he might have to send a courier to Kishiar more swiftly than he’d initially thought upon arriving in the village.

——

“Your Grace, a courier has just arrived from the East,” a voice informed him.

“Is it from the Lord of Hartan?”

“No, it’s a report from our spy in a nearby village.”

Seated at his desk, buried in paperwork filled with complex laws, Kishiar finally shifted his gaze to his adjutant, Nathan.

“A report?”

“Do you remember when you ordered me to recruit several spies in the East to monitor the long-term movements there? One of them. I inquired if he knew anything about this matter and the answer came quickly.”

Kishiar had not taken lightly the fact that a Cavalry member, originally from the East and on leave, had not yet returned. The East, where the Ducal faction was gaining ground, had been subtly pushing back against the Awakeners ever since Kishiar expressed his desire to form the Cavalry.

While the incident was likely minor, there was a possibility that some foolish noble had insulted the Cavalry member, and by extension, Kishiar and the Emperor.

For this reason, he had instructed Nathan to investigate all possible leads for information, beyond the direct letter he sent to the Lord of Hartan. The reply from the Lord of Hartan was yet to arrive, but the answer from another source came unexpectedly quickly, which did not sit well with Kishiar.

Kishiar broke the seal on the letter Nathan handed to him and read it quickly. His red eyes cooled significantly after a moment.

“So, there’s been a fire.”

“…In Hartan?”

“Yes, and it’s rumored that the Lord’s castle burned completely. The timing coincides with Devran Hartude’s stay in Hartan. Might be a coincidence, but we can’t be sure.”

“But there was no report from the Black Pigeon about this.”

Of the countless events that occurred daily across the country, disasters were critical reports that needed immediate communication.

If a fire severe enough to consume the entire Lord’s castle had occurred, naturally, an immediate report should have reached the capital administration via couriers. Yet, even their spies in nearby villages didn’t know the extent of the casualties; something was suspicious.

One could argue that the delay in handling the incident caused the report to be late. Still, Kishiar remembered that Devran Hartude had the power to conjure fire.

“Oh, another courier has arrived.”

At that moment, Nathan, standing by the window, caught another small bird that had flown in.

“Is it from Hartan?”

“I’m sorry, but it isn’t. It’s a letter from another spy in the East.”

“What does it say?”

Kishiar asked his adjutant to read out the new message. As Nathan unfolded the small pouch tied to the bird’s leg and read the letter, his expression shifted slightly.

“It’s an irregular report unrelated to the current incident. It says that ten Imperial Knights have come to train at Mount Clayman.”

“Isn’t Mount Clayman near Hartan?”

Kishiar’s memory, which had the entire continental map memorized, was unquestionably flawless.

“Indeed it is. And among the knights who went for training this time, it seems Kiolle da Diarca is present.”

Kishiar’s handsome lips curled into a subtle smirk.

“Huh. Is that scoundrel there? I thought he’d learned a lesson after getting scolded by my assistant, but it seems that wasn’t the case?”

Kiolle da Diarca was the youngest son of Duke Diarca, who had spoiled him so much that he didn’t listen to anyone and earned a notorious reputation. The Duke arranged a place for his youngest son in the Imperial Knight to lead a comfortable life, but this hope was beautifully shattered with the recent formation of the Cavalry.

Kiolle, who was humiliated for the first time in his life by a common-born Cavalry member, Yuder Aile, in the training field, could not contain his fury and contacted Kishiar numerous times. The calls

were almost threats, demanding immediate expulsion of the audacious Cavalry member and sending him to the Diarca family.

Of course, Kishiar ignored all of it. Just when he thought the matter was finally settled and forgotten, a few days ago, Yuder once again encountered Kiolle and bestowed upon him an even greater insult.

Assuming that there would be another round of complaints, but receiving none, Kishiar thought Kiolle had finally learned some humility. However, it appeared that Duke Diarca had simply intervened, sending his son away for training.

“Predictable. The old man must have sent him away to cool his head, given all the trouble he’s causing.”

“Do you think the Duke knew something when he sent him?”

“If he had known anything, that old man Duke Diarca would never have sent Kiolle there, Nathan.”

Unlike the cautious question from Nathan, Kishiar’s answer was bitterly sarcastic.

“He may have lost a few teeth due to old age, but an old lion is still a lion. The person who best understands his youngest son’s abilities, coldly and clearly, is none other than himself.”

“Still, if they happen to meet again at that place… I’m not sure it will turn out well this time.”

There was no telling what would happen if, by any chance, Yuder and Kiolle were to encounter each other again in the eastern region, where the reach of the Duke’s family was strong. It seemed like a great misfortune.

When Nathan voiced his slight concern, Kishiar shook his head.

“There’s no need to worry about my assistant, even if something happens. …What’s more concerning is the report about the fire.”

“I’ll look into that further.”

“Do that. And Nathan, be prepared to go there at any moment if necessary.”

“Do you want me to deliver the message personally?”

At the unexpected command, Nathan’s eyes narrowed.

“Yes. It’s better not to go, but just in case, we need to be prepared.”

“Understood.”

The loyal adjutant did not ask for reasons.

“Now, let’s call upon the mages who have been on their feet all day.”

Kishiar realized that the fact Thais Yulman and his disciple could come here was due to the information leaked by Duke Diarca. The fact that they simply provided information to the mages of the Pearl Tower, who didn’t have much connection with the Duke’s family, meant they didn’t show much interest in the power of the Red Stone.

‘Fortunate, indeed.’

All the nobles knew that the Emperor’s health was deteriorating day by day. If they knew that Kishiar and the Emperor were hoping for a miracle through the unknown power within the Red Stone, the dukes would have done whatever it took to eliminate it. Or, knowing the power of the stone, they would have sent a perfect spy who would be prepared to die to report to the dukes.

In this regard, the deep-seated character of a true mage in Thais Yulman, who had come here, was quite fortunate for Kishiar. Thais was a leading authority in such research, and he was stubborn enough to willingly finger his pledge that he would keep his mouth shut forever as long as he could conduct his research.

Perhaps Duke Diarca had leaked the information thinking that Thais would investigate the Red Stone and eavesdrop on the news he would send to the Pearl Tower. But did he really expect that Thais would pledge to keep his mouth shut so easily and even bear a grudge against his youngest son?

Kishiar felt quite pleased when he thought about how the Duke would react when he found out about this later.

The face of Yuder Aile, who suggested using Thais, came to mind. His assistant seemed to have a great talent for ruining what the greedy Dukes wanted. It was a skill he liked.

—

“Once we pass through the guards you see over there, we’ll be in Hartan.”

The man with a scar on his face paused as he gestured towards the guards positioned not far off. Behind the stone wall and the watchtower they were guarding, the outline of a village could be seen just as he had described. Yuder stepped forward, leading the group towards the guards.

“Who are you?”

“We are Cavalry members who have been dispatched by Duke Kishiar La Orr Peletta, the Commander of the Cavalry.”

“The Cavalry?”

For a moment, Yuder noticed a heavy wariness pass over the faces of the guards.

“…Show us some evidence to verify your identity.”

“Here it is.”

Yuder produced the identity certificate he had received from Kishiar. After reading the paper several times with a cautious gaze, the guard returned it with a heavy voice.

“So it is. Seems correct. Four people, correct?”

Their gaze swept over Yuder and the others behind him. Yuder assumed that the guards would certainly be startled at the sight of the man with a huge scar on his face, but their expressions were remarkably calm.

Finding this strange, Yuder turned around and was surprised to see the face of the man standing behind Gakane and Jimmy had transformed into someone else’s.

While the man still had a noticeable scar, his handsome face had disappeared, and instead, the average face of one of the bandits they had encountered on the mountain and fled from was there. Moreover, he was wearing a cavalry uniform identical to Yuder’s.

It looked no different from the real thing, but it was definitely a form made by overlaying an illusion.

‘Using illusion abilities like this.’

The man smiled slightly as his eyes met Yuder’s. It seemed that there was no need to worry about the scar on his face thanks to the ability to show illusions, and indeed, it was a remarkable skill. If he hadn’t seen and heard of his abilities beforehand, he might have suspected him to be a shape-shifter.

“…Yes. Four people. Correct.”

“And your purpose?”

“We wish to meet and speak with the Lord.”

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Yuder had purposefully obscured his true intentions. His original aim was to find traces of Devran Hartude, but to do that, he needed to meet the Lord anyway. This question could also confirm the extent to which the information given by the bandit was true.

Sure enough, the expressions of the guards darkened instantly, suggesting Yuder was not wrong in his thinking.

“You seem to have come from afar and have not heard the news yet. Our lord passed away in an accident a few days ago.”

“Is that so? Then, who is currently in charge of the village?”

“The Lord’s eldest daughter, Lady Sabelrina, and her husband, Sir Ryel, also met with misfortune on the same day… Currently, the youngest son, Lord Zakail, is taking care of the funeral arrangements and the aftermath.”

“Then, I must meet him.”

“Please do so. In fact, today is the last day of the funeral, and all the villagers are finishing the rites at the back of the mountain. You should find them there. Ah, and before that, outsiders are required to leave their horses at our stables. Please hand over your reins.”

The guard returned Yuder’s identification. They watched, their eyes full of suspicion, as Yuder pocketed his ID.

Yuder watched as Gakane and Jimmy handed over their reins to the guards, and then he carefully opened the door of the small birdcage hanging from his saddle.

Feeling the gaze of the bandit leader on him as he took out the small bird and turned it over his shoulder, Yuder sensed a curiosity about what he might do next.

Ignoring the man's gaze, Yuder quickly conjured up a dust storm. As the gritty wind blew dirt onto the faces of the guards, startled voices echoed from all directions.

"Damn, what is this?"

Taking advantage of the moment when the guards closed or covered their faces, Yuder released his messenger bird. The bird, trained to fly around for a day without a letter and then return, would be back by the time Yuder called for it within a day.

'Even if they see the birdcage, they'd realize it had a messenger bird. But there's nothing I can do about it.'

As he passed the guard post and entered the outskirts of the village, the first thing he noticed was the heavy smell of burnt wood that pricked his nostrils.

Yuder picked up a stick from the ground and lit it. He could have conjured fire with magic, but using a torch would raise less suspicion should he encounter anyone.

Under the flickering torchlight, the sight of scorched earth and burnt plants confirmed the truth of the rumor that half the village had been set ablaze.

"Over there, is that the castle?"

Unable to hide his anxious voice, Jimmy whispered to Yuder and pointed at something black in the distance. It wasn't very large, but it was unmistakably a castle. The sight of its excessively dark silhouette in the night provoked an eerie sensation.

“There really is no one in the village. They must all have gone to the back mountain.”

“That over there looks like a cornfield… It’s all burnt. It’s the harvest season now…”

As Gakane mumbled, scanning the surroundings, Jimmy added another comment, looking at the blackened field. Yuder turned his head towards the bandit leader, who was quietly walking. The man was still wearing the image of his subordinate in military uniform.

“How long do you plan to keep this charade?”

“Isn’t it strange if I’m the only one dressed differently? I know it’s uncomfortable, but maintaining this guise is to lessen the suspicion and wariness you all might incur.”

In response to Yuder’s question, the bandit leader calmly retorted. He certainly had a way with words.

“If you’re so thoughtful, why not tell us your name?”

“You’re asking that now?”

He had been wondering when the question would come. With a mumble, the man’s gaze landed on Yuder’s face.

“Nahan.”

Whether it was his real name or an alias, Yuder didn’t know. However, he decided to include it in the report he would send to Kisiar.

They continued to walk into the depths of the village, where no one was in sight. Upon arrival, it was more than a simple village; compared to the size of the actual territory, the area inhabited by people was quite small.

As they passed the charred windmill, drawing closer to the castle, the smell of burning became more intense. The road was littered with black ash and burnt fields not yet cleared away.

“With damage this severe… I imagine there were many casualties.”

“There were hardly any, besides the lord and his wife who died in the castle. Especially outside the castle, there were none.”

Grasping Gakane’s muttering, Nahan promptly responded, which earned him a suspicious look from Jimmy.

“How do you know that so well?”

“Using this ability, it’s not difficult to enter the castle and hear the stories firsthand.”

With an ability to overlay the exact face of someone else as an illusion, it would have been easy for him to blend in among the castle’s servants. Yuder began to surmise how Nahan had obtained his information.

‘In other words, despite having such an ability, he couldn’t find the whereabouts of his missing comrade and Devran.’

Why did a noble need to keep such a secret while handling a few commoner prisoners? It was a strange thing. Yuder felt as if he understood why the man was so invested in this. Even he, Yuder, would have done the same. Yuder lifted his head towards the lost-in-thought Nahan.

“How long can you maintain your ability?”

“I’d like to say it’s a secret… but it’s not as short as you might worry. It can last a few days as long as I don’t exhaust myself.”

Upon hearing the word “days,” Gakane’s expression turned odd. He too could maintain his shadow clone for as long as he wished. However, illusions were more complicated to manage than clones. It felt strange to verify that a man who used to be a bandit possessed such extraordinary skills.

“Who goes there!”

Just as Yuder was about to ask Nahan something else, someone shouted with a full measure of wariness.

In the darkness, a few men dressed in guard uniforms with black cloaks for formal occasions staggered forward. They approached with their hands on the hilts of their swords, but stopped in surprise upon seeing the uniforms worn by Yuder and his party.

“That uniform… could it be…?”

“Heng, shut up! Who are you?”

The one who yelled at the young guard, whose surprised expression couldn’t be hidden, was an elderly man with a white beard. Observing the shield-shaped badge on his chest and his more luxurious attire compared to those around him, Yuder stepped forward and introduced himself.

“We come from the capital under the orders of His Excellency, Duke Peletta. I’m Yuder Aile, affiliated with the Cavalry. Might you be the captain of the Hartan guard?”

Upon hearing about the capital and Duke Peletta, the faces of the guards stiffened in unison.

“Indeed, I am Eclen Bukan, the captain of the guards. If you come on the Duke’s orders, have you come to meet our Lord?”

Despite hearing that they were sent by the duke, the guard captain questioned them sharply, his demeanor not softening at all.

“Yes. But we were told at the entrance that, unfortunately, your Lord has passed away. We offer our condolences.”

Though Yuder’s voice was cool and emotionless, the courtesy he displayed was impeccable. After serving as the Cavalry commander for so long, this level of etiquette had become as natural to him as breathing.

“Spare the pointless talk. What’s your business here?”

“We were told that Zakail is currently in charge. We would like to meet him.”

“He’s currently busy. If you wait in the castle, I’ll inform Zakail and ask him to come see you.”

“Understood.”

“Heng! Escort them to the castle. The steward will guide them once they’re there.”

Seeming to find the mere act of conversation displeasing, the captain of the guards turned away abruptly, raising his voice towards a young guard. The guard, with a reluctant expression, mumbled a few words in an unintelligible dialect and made a vague hand gesture towards Yuder.

“Follow me.”

Their ill-treatment continued even after they arrived at the castle. The elderly steward, after hearing the situation from the young guard, alternated his gaze between the scorched castle gate and Yuder’s face, before eventually clicking his tongue as if to signal they

should enter. He led them to a worn-out, dark room with no place to sit.

“Please wait here.”

“Just a moment. Here, really?”

Gakane, who had quietly followed all this while, finally voiced his disapproval. It felt too unreasonable to be asked to wait indefinitely in a room that looked more like a storage, especially at this late hour.

“It’s the only place that’s not damaged and still decent. I’m really sorry we couldn’t provide a better place for visitors who came from far away.”

“…”

Leaving behind an apology that didn’t seem sincere at all, the steward quickly shut the door and disappeared, leaving behind only a small lantern.

“What is this all about? Such blatant disregard. No one even mentioned Devran first, despite seeing us.”

“The guard who escorted us was openly abusive.”

“Abusive? When?”

“You wouldn’t have noticed because it’s an Eastern dialect.”

As Jimmy replied with a defeated look, Gakane let out a short, bitter laugh.

“So, is all this related to Devran’s disappearance… Yuder, are we really going to wait here quietly?”

“For now.”

Yuder quietly responded while examining the room. The damp, dark room was filled with the stench of rotting old boxes and not even a single surviving lamp. There was a small window which barely allowed air in, but that was all.

“Well… Standing around will only tire us. Let’s sit and wait.”

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Chapter 74

Gakane had summoned his shadow clone to sift through the stacked boxes, spreading the cleaner ones on the ground. Once he had arranged some of the boxes to serve as makeshift chairs and a bed, everyone sat down. Then, Nahan started a conversation with Gakane.

“You have a unique ability. Can your shadow pass through walls?”

“Why do you want to know?”

Though Gakane had always seemed friendly, his reluctance to let down his guard in front of Nahan suggested he was selective in displaying his social skills.

After that, an uncomfortable silence lingered, filled only with the anticipation of waiting. Perhaps growing weary of waiting in the late hour, Jimmy began to doze off, leaning against the wall.

By the time the flickering candle inside the lantern had melted down by half, murmuring voices echoed from outside the window. It seemed the villagers who had gone to the back mountain had returned.

“Ah, um… it seems everyone is back…? They’ll call us soon, right?”

Jimmy, who had been shaking his head as he fought sleep, perked up his ears and opened his eyes at the sound. Yuder, watching the young boy struggle valiantly against his sleepiness and anxiety, gently tapped his round head.

“If you’re sleepy, just lay down and sleep.”

“No, I’m not sleepy. I didn’t sleep!”

Startled by Yuder’s touch, Jimmy made his excuse, his face becoming a vivid red even in the dim light. Of course, no one believed him.

Given the excessive hospitality they had received, the likelihood of the deceased Lord’s son calling them right away was fifty-fifty. If nothing was amiss, they would be summoned promptly, but if not, who knew what might happen.

‘We’ll find out soon enough.’

The murmuring voices echoed from the castle entrance for quite a while, and the inside was also rather noisy. However, no sound of someone coming to call them was heard. Even as darkness gave way to the approaching dawn, the situation remained the same.

Eventually, when the sun had fully risen, Yuder rose from his spot and turned the ring handle on the door.

Creak. Creak-creak. No matter how many times he turned and pushed, the door refused to open outward.

“It’s now clear.”

Yuder’s voice resonated low in the stuffy room.

“It seems they have no intention of meeting us.”

“This is truly ridiculous.”

Gakane sneered, his eyes showing signs of fatigue.

“So, what’s the plan now?”

If asked, Gakane could immediately summon his shadow clone to break down the door. Jimmy was also a boy who, despite his rusty

practice sword, could slice through walls like the legendary sword masters in the tales.

“Just say the word. It’ll be quick to break down and get out.”

But contrary to Gakane’s thoughts, Yuder did not immediately try to break down the door. Lost in thought for a moment, he moved to the window and began to whistle in a peculiar pattern.

After repeating the distinctive whistle three times, something flew from afar into the small window. Perched on Yuder’s outstretched finger like a torch was undoubtedly the messenger bird he had kept at his saddle side until yesterday.

“…A messenger bird?”

“Let’s send a report first, then move.”

His soft voice drew attention. Gakane watched as Yuder drew a small piece of paper from his pocket. Just as he wondered how Yuder planned to write without a pen, Yuder lifted a finger and brought it close to the paper.

Moments later, a minuscule flame flowed forth, outlining delicate shapes akin to script, gently searing the surface of the paper. While he had turned his body to prevent others from seeing what he was writing, everyone could recognize the incredible precision involved in his ability, an application so intricate it was scarcely believable even to those watching.

Many besides Yuder could wield the power of flame, but none were capable of utilizing it in such a way, with such control. This level of fine-tuning was even more challenging than summoning a flame large enough to blanket an entire mountain.

Watching the astonishment, not entirely concealed, in the eyes of the bandit leader who had introduced himself as Nahan, Gakane felt

a covert sense of superiority.

After awakening their abilities, these individuals had lived out their lives in arrogance. However, once they joined the Cavalry, they experienced a profound sense of defeat in the face of Yuder's overwhelming skill.

Even though Kishiar, the Commander, was the one who had created the Cavalry, it was largely thanks to Yuder that they had learned humility and unified through effort. Regardless of how exceptional the bandit leader's abilities were, Gakane was sure he would be no exception. Feeling this, his nerves, which had been on edge ever since his arrival, began to regain a sense of calm.

Yuder, who had seemingly premeditated his words, swiftly crafted the letter. He then rolled up the paper and placed it in a small pouch attached to the leg of the messenger bird. As he approached the window and reached out his hand, the bird gave a low cry, unfurled its wings, and flew away.

"We're done here. Now… let's go."

Yuder, having turned his body around, fixed his intense gaze on the closed door. His eyes bore a coldness that made one feel as if they were experiencing winter.

"Sir, Sir Zakail! Sir Zakail!"

A few days ago, the youngest son of Lord Hartan, Zakail Hartan, who had unexpectedly passed away, had been incredibly tired from attending the funeral till late into the night.

However, the hand shaking him awake, despite having been commanded not to disturb him, was insistently rough, as if it couldn't care less about his state.

"Sir Zakail! Please wake up. Master Zakail!"

“What is it?”

“They… they’re here.”

“…”

The tremor in the voice, laden with loathing and fear, was unnaturally intense. Zakail felt sleep abandon him instantly, his heavy eyelids snapping open as he reluctantly sat up.

“Who are you talking about?”

“Well, last night, some uninvited guests showed up, and the steward locked them in the storage house. Those bastards just broke the door down a moment ago and are causing a ruckus demanding to see you…!”

Zakail harshly slapped the servant, who was babbling on nervously.

“Ouch.”

“Didn’t I make it clear yesterday? I am no longer a young master. Soon, I’ll be a lord! Make sure to use the correct title!”

The events of last night hadn’t just entailed Zakail performing the last rites for his deceased relatives. He had shown those who had been mocking him as an unworthy shell of a noble since birth what he was truly made of and had succeeded in carving his own destiny.

‘Of course, my elder brother is still around, but he’ll leave soon.’

If his brother hadn’t foolishly disclosed his plans of leaving everything behind for a commoner woman, Zakail might not have achieved the victory he was relishing now.

The raucous bunch had all been cleared away, and he had just been considering finally getting some well-deserved rest when the

servant woke him up, still using the old honorifics. It didn't sit well with Zakail.

As Zakail stared down at the servant, trembling from the smack on the cheek, and pondered his fate, the door abruptly swung open again.

"Master Zakail."

Simply from the sound of the voice, Zakail knew it was the old attendant's son. He pressed his throbbing head and spoke sharply.

"Leave. I will rest some more. Did I not say not to disturb me while I'm sleeping?"

"It's not that, Master Zakail. The thing is…"

"Out of the way."

A strange voice interjected, pushing aside the attendant's son. Thereafter, several sets of footsteps neatly filed into his room.

"Are you Zakail Hartan?"

"…Who are you?"

He tried not to show fear, but Zakail involuntarily felt a chill. The aura emitted by those who stood before him was excessively cold and sinister. The man with black hair standing at the forefront made his spine tingle just by his gaze.

"I thought you would recognize us immediately by our uniforms, a shame."

Yuder, standing before Zakail, could easily sense all the emotions he was experiencing. Every servant he had encountered on his way here, since breaking through the door, wore the same expression.

It puzzled him why people always acted defensively even to those who approached them with respect. He'd experienced this many times in his past life, and it was no different now.

"We are Cavalry members from the capital under the command of Duke Peletta. We came to see you, Zakail, on behalf of your late father, but there seems to be some misunderstanding…"

As Yuder trailed off and looked around, the servants meeting his gaze quickly retreated, which caused a slight smirk to tug at the corners of his mouth.

"Despite waiting all night, no one came to see us. We couldn't wait any longer in a room without a chair, so we took the liberty of coming here first. Is now a good time?"

"This…"

Zakail's furious gaze was pinned on the servants peering in from outside the door. However, he quickly calmed himself, biting his lip and standing up. The young and ambitious nobleman didn't forget that the first thing he needed to maintain in this situation was his dignity.

"So…that's how it is. Everyone was in a state of chaos due to the fire incident a few days ago, causing the death of my father and brother. I too fell asleep from exhaustion as soon as I returned at dawn… I apologize for being discourteous to our guests. I hope you will understand. Could you please wait in the drawing-room for a while? I will get ready and join you shortly."

Zakail was still in his sleepwear, having just woken up and not even washed his face. It was embarrassing to be seen by others in this state. He clenched his teeth and tolerated his shame. The man with black hair, who looked at him indifferently, gave a small nod a moment later.

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Chapter 75

“Understood. But I fear I can’t wait for long. I am simply famished.”

“Attendant! Guide our guests to the reception room and arrange some food for them. Quick!”

Zakail barked nervously. Barely poking his head out from the door, the elderly attendant scrambled to respond, “Yes, sir!” Zakail watched the rabble depart, then swiftly washed his face and changed his clothes.

He thought the world would be his once the funeral was over, but what on earth was happening on the very first day? An icy premonition slithered down Zakail’s spine. He shivered and lowered his head.

‘No. If I think I’m unlucky, that’s exactly what will happen. I must stay positive.’

Hadn’t they said they were the Cavalry members sent by the Duke of Peletta? Then, their purpose of visit was clear. Hadn’t they also mentioned that such people would be coming soon?

Everything was already in place. It was just that their arrival was slightly, very slightly, earlier than expected.

Taking a deep breath, Zakail stepped into the reception room. While he had been preparing himself, the uninvited guests were comfortably seated in the high-quality chairs that hadn’t been burned, nonchalantly clearing the dishes.

“Yuder, you should try this. It’s my first time eating it, but it’s pretty good.”

“That’s right. It’s a special dish from the east called Koakat. They say it’s delicious when added to stew.”

The speed at which they were eating was astonishing. No matter how hastily the cook served the dishes, they disappeared in the blink of an eye. The sight was dizzying. Zakail managed to cough loudly, drawing the attention of the unwelcome guests.

“It appears… the food suits your taste. That’s a relief.”

“Yes, thanks to you.”

Yuder, who had been waiting for Zakail, replied leisurely. His demeanor was as if he were the host, which caused Zakail’s eyes to twitch involuntarily.

“Now that you have had your fill… we should discuss the matters at hand.”

“Ah, I wanted to, but there’s a new dish out. Let’s finish this first.”

Yuder gestured towards the cook, who had brought out a new dish at the perfect moment.

The cook, who was unsure of what to do in the presence of Zakail, carefully set the new dish on the table. Immediately, Jimmy and Gakane lunged at it with their forks. Nahan also coolly managed to snatch a large piece of meat from the dish and quickly devoured it.

Seeing them disregard etiquette and eagerly devour the food as he had requested, Yuder felt a great sense of satisfaction.

The more pride these people had in their noble status, the more they struggled with this behavior. They weren’t accustomed to holding back their disdain when faced with something displeasing.

“This is delicious. It’s superbly grilled with sauce. I think I might fall in love with eastern cuisine. Yuder, are you sure you don’t want any more?”

Gakane, whose mannerisms would never have suggested his noble birth, chewed his grilled vegetables with relish and presented a piece of the meat dish to Yuder with his fork.

“Here, ah.”

“Oh, dear…”

The servants’ faces changed at the incredibly embarrassing act that not even commoners would perform in front of others. Their roles had clearly been reversed.

‘Gakane. He’s rather good at this.’

He knew his nobles well, and it showed in this instance too. Yuder internally admired Gakane’s newfound talent and resolved to match his pace.

Gakane flashed a happy smile as he accepted the meat that was offered to him. The strikingly handsome man, radiant as a rose, warmed the surrounding air with his genuine smile.

“Is it good?”

“Mmm.”

“Yuder! Try mine too! You must taste this!”

Yuder accepted a bite of the dish that Jimmy offered. He was actually quite full, but he couldn’t refuse if it meant causing more discomfort to the humans before him.

The newly prepared dishes presented by the chef were quickly devoured.

“Now… may we clear the table and discuss?”

Zakail, who had been sitting at a distance as if reluctant to join, finally spoke with a sour face. Yuder, seeing the distaste evident on Zakail’s face as he struggled to speak, nodded.

“Of course.”

While the table was being cleared, Yuder briefly explained his name and his reasons for being there to Zakail. Upon hearing that Yuder had come in search of Devran Hartude, Zakail bit his lip and nodded.

“Devran Hartude… yes. Someone by that name came by not long ago. I remember him.”

“That will expedite matters. Where is Devran now?”

“He’s dead.”

“Excuse me?”

The one who questioned was not Yuder. Gakane, wearing a fierce expression, glared at Zakail.

“What are you talking about? Devran is dead?”

“Precisely. Do you know that he was trying to burn down our peaceful Hartan?”

“I heard about it on my way here. But Devran isn’t like that. Why would he want to burn down his precious hometown, where his family lives?”

“I don’t know either. I was running errands for my father in another village at the time. So all I know is what I heard after I returned to the village after the fire.”

After saying this, Zakail cast his eyes downward. He appeared to be carefully choosing his words.

“He killed his family himself, ran to this castle, and caused a big fire. My sick father couldn’t escape in time, and my sister and brother-in-law who tried to save him also suffered. My older brother is a knight and couldn’t come immediately, but after the funeral yesterday, he had to leave urgently. He said he’ll be back in a few days.”

He stopped speaking and displayed a mournful face. To anyone watching, he was a noble young man distraught from losing his family.

“As the youngest son who never properly learned about the family affairs, what can I do alone? The best I could do was gather the townspeople and finish the funeral. I planned to discuss the matter with my brother when he returns and send a report to the capital… I never imagined you would come looking for us this soon.”

“I understand the situation. But you haven’t explained why Devran is dead.”

At Yuder’s calm response, Zakail furrowed his brows.

“You still haven’t guessed? He took his own life yesterday. It seems he gave up after being sentenced to death and died right away in jail. Although he was a condemned prisoner, since he was under Duke Peletta’s command, we were planning to report first and then carry out the execution…… This turn of events has given me a headache.”

There were no loopholes in Zakail’s explanation. Everything seemed to make sense.

‘Except, of course, for the gaping hole of why Devran would kill his family and start a fire….’

Yuder’s gaze bored into Zakail’s weary face, as if trying to read the hidden intentions behind his words.

“Understood. So, after your elder brother returns and takes his place as the lord, reports and follow-up procedures will officially start, is that right?”

“No, not exactly.”

At Yuder’s question, Zakail shook his head.

“It’s true we plan to discuss and proceed with the reporting and follow-up after my brother’s return, but as for the lordship… I will likely be the one to take that position.”

Zakail paused for a moment after saying that.

“My brother already has a place in the Silver Cross Knights. Despite his young age, he has outstanding skills and has already ascended to the position of deputy commander. It’s said that in a few years, he’ll become the commander and receive the title of viscount. Given this position, becoming the lord of such a small territory would rather be a shackle to him.”

“Your brother seems remarkable.”

“Indeed. Since he was young, his dream has been to leave this small, boring place and become an outstanding knight. So, the one left behind will be me, someone very… different from him.”

For the first time, Zakail relaxed his furrowed brow and smiled. Yuder read jealousy and admiration in his eyes.

‘Jealousy….’

Zakail Hartan, the youngest son of the former lord. According to eastern customs, he was in a position of a youngest child who had

nothing to inherit but the nobility status. However, due to the fire incident a few days ago, he had suddenly come into the position of the lord.

The only person who had benefited from the entire series of incidents was Zakail Hartan.

Was this all a coincidence?

‘No.’

Yuder was confident based on his experiences. It couldn’t be. The man before his eyes was hiding something, and undoubtedly, within that, there was the clue to Devran’s whereabouts.

‘But he won’t easily spill the beans. I need to observe and wait a bit longer.’

After organizing his thoughts, Yuder slightly bowed his head towards Zakail.

“I understand your situation. However, as we’re here on the order of Duke Peletta, it’s difficult for us to return immediately. We’d like to continue our investigation and report back to the Duke. Would that be acceptable?”

Yuder intentionally used the title of ‘Duke’ rather than ‘Captain’. Whether it had the desired effect or not, a troubled expression briefly crossed Zakail’s face.

Regardless of how low the emperor and his brother, Duke Peletta’s, prestige was in the east, their noble status was recognized by everyone. A minor noble like Zakail would inevitably feel small in front of a noble of higher rank. It was one of the lessons about the psychology of nobles that Yuder had learned in his previous life.

“…Do as you wish. I’ll instruct the townspeople to cooperate.”

“I appreciate your understanding. Then we’ll stay here for a while.”

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Chapter 76

Having obtained the answer he wanted, Yuder escorted the three who had eaten their fill to a proper guest room, a stark contrast from their previous accommodations.

“They claimed that everything else was completely burnt down, and only that storage-like room was left. But that was a total lie.”

“I know, right? There’s not even a hint of smoke and everything seems to be in perfect condition!”

Listening to the outraged voices of Gakane and Jimmy, Yuder turned towards the window. From his vantage point, he had an overview of most of the Hartan territory.

The small fiefdom, which should have been charming and peaceful, bore stark, black scars under the sunlight, revealing the cruelty it had suffered.

‘Weren’t they saying there were hardly any casualties?’

Nahan had indeed said so, but seeing the village filled with the remnants of a fire caused him to doubt this information.

‘Of course, of the people I’ve met here, the most suspicious one is Zakail Hartan.’

Yuder turned his back to the window and recalled the conversation he’d just had with Zakail Hartan. Even though Zakail had reluctantly agreed upon hearing Kishiar’s name, he hadn’t hesitated much in accepting Yuder’s request.

If there had been anything to worry about, it would have been that an outsider from the capital was so willing to pry into the affairs

of the village. Zakail didn’t respond as easily to that. Considering Zakail’s demeanour, he seemed too proud and not very good at hiding his emotions, which only increased Yuder’s suspicions.

Hadn’t he purposely disrupted Zakail’s composure to take a peek at his intentions, asking his companions to show their lack of manners during the meal?

Despite all this, if Zakail still behaved as such, there could only be one plausible answer: Zakail was confident that no matter what Yuder and his Cavalry did, they would not discover his secret.

However, not everything in the world goes as planned. Yuder, recalling the messenger pigeon that would have reached the capital by now, formulated his next plan.

—

“Haha. This is the first time I’ve heard such nagging since the Emperor’s passing. Seems like I must not have gained much trust.”

“…Who are you referring to?”

“Who do you think?”

Kishiar waved the letter in his hand with a slow, elegant smile. His adjutant, Nathan Zuckerman, squinted at the letter with a frown.

“My assistant.”

The moment Kishiar woke up from his morning nap, he had been greeted by the messenger pigeon.

The little bird that flew from Hartan was honoured to drink water directly from the Duke after delivering the letter. The pigeon, currently perched on a small statue on the desk and preening its feathers, looked extremely comfortable and content.

“What has he written to make you say such things?”

“Curious, are you?”

“Why not take a look for yourself? Especially you, Nathan, I’ll let you see.” Handing the letter to his adjutant with a light voice, Kishiar watched as Nathan scrutinized the brown characters that filled the small sheet of paper, furrowing his brows slightly.

“The ink color is unusual.”

“It’s not ink.”

“Excuse me?”

“Take a closer look. It’s not written, it’s been lightly burned onto the paper. Quite a skill, don’t you think?”

Indeed, it was as Kishiar had said. Nathan rubbed the characters with his finger, noticing they didn’t smudge at all, and realized his lord was correct. The technique was incredible and almost unbelievable.

“His rate of improvement is beyond monstrous.”

Nathan Zuckerman had reached the pinnacle of Sword Mastery at a very young age. It was a lofty position only those who boasted they could accomplish anything with a sword could reach.

However, even he found it difficult to accurately write a letter on a piece of palm-sized paper with the tip of his sword. The challenge was not just about strength but the ability to delicately divide and control that power.

And Yuder Aile accomplished such a feat with ease. His control was terrifying enough to send shivers down the spine of anyone who knew he was an ally.

Dodging the gaze of his lord who seemed to have no sense of caution and was just smiling, Nathan cast his eyes once more on the letter. Although the script was small, it wasn't unreadable.

A moment later, Nathan, who had been rapidly scanning the letter, looked up with a puzzled expression.

"Lord Hartan and the heir are already dead, and the member we need to save is imprisoned, facing execution for setting fire to a village… and on their way there, they've encountered a bandit group composed of Awakeners… shouldn't you send more people?"

"He said he doesn't need them."

Kishiar's answer was clear-cut.

"Despite all these troubles, he is confident that he can resolve everything within three days, so he doesn't need extra people. I can't do anything if he tells me to focus on investigating the Red Stone here and not to forget about it."

"…He didn't write it that rudely, though."

If one took out all the courtesies that could be found in a book teaching the basics of letter writing and summarized, that was roughly the message in the latter half of the letter.

"Even if the missing member is still alive, how can they possibly rescue a prisoner facing execution? Shouldn't I go there myself at this point?"

"If he felt the situation was urgent, he wouldn't have said that. He would have asked to smash everything first and then requested us to clean up afterward. Or he would have retreated and contacted us from somewhere else."

Kishiar replied leisurely, as if he could read the writer's thoughts.

“But judging by the fact that he chose to accompany the bandit leader he met there and even sent the name, it’s clear that Yuder Aile thinks this person is extraordinary. I think it’s a pseudonym though… what do you think?”

“If it’s a pseudonym, it’s possible he’s from the same country as me.”

There was a strange certainty in Nathan’s words.

“Yes. The name, after all, means ‘revenge’ in the language of the Southern Kingdom. It seems like there’s an intention there.”

The empire knew little about the Southern Kingdom, which was separated from it by a desert. However, Nathan, who was from the South, and Kishiar, who had been with him for a long time, knew more about the language and culture of the South than others did.

The Southern Kingdom had a language and culture system completely different from the surrounding countries, including the empire. As a result, their naming conventions were also significantly different.

A brief smile of interest flickered across Kishiar’s beautiful face before disappearing.

“In any case, investigate the bandit group. And find out more about Zakail Hartan, the youngest son of Lord Hartan, who has currently assumed full authority. And…”

As Kishiar casually piled on additional tasks, his red eyes lost their smile and became calm for the first time.

“If there’s no further contact after three days, Nathan, you take the seal and proceed as planned.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Even though one can quickly clear the garbage piled in front of them, no one knows what kind of mess might unfold beneath it.”

As Nathan lowered his head, Kishiar’s expression once again transformed into its usual ease.

“What about the mages? Didn’t they say they needed help?”

“So far, no. They spent the entire day writing and observing from a distance.”

Kishiar had personally moved the Red Stone into the building’s basement yesterday to facilitate the mages’ investigations.

It was a huge, open space, making it easy to maintain a distance from the Red Stone’s power, and also convenient to store necessary items. As no one knew there was space beneath the lodging building, there could be no better place for investigation.

Having listened to Nathan’s report, Kishiar nodded, leaning deeply back into his chair.

“Good. Caution is a virtue. And the members?”

“As usual, they’re dedicated to their training. There’s nothing in particular for you to worry about.”

“I see. Keep observing.”

Kishiar, having ended the conversation, smoothly extended his hand.

“Give back that report.”

Having most likely memorized it upon reading, he must have something more to examine. Kishiar began to look over the retrieved paper again. To avoid disturbing his lord, Nathan silently retreated.

The blunt but loyal adjutant’s gaze shifted over a scripture being meticulously organized, then out to the sky through the window.

—

“Oh, well, I really don’t know.”

“The fire was such a huge event, I can hardly remember what happened that day.”

“I don’t know. I was… I was too preoccupied with protecting my family.”

After obtaining Zakail’s permission, Yuder ventured outside the castle to explore the surroundings. All the townspeople he encountered were on their guard, nervously retreating at his approach. Whenever he managed to corner someone and ask about the day of the fire, their answers were all the same: they couldn’t remember or they didn’t know.

“It’s like we’ve become a plague to them, avoiding us at all costs. People are so suspicious.”

Gakane muttered a self-deprecating comment as he looked around the deserted surroundings. The townspeople’s suspicion was so profound that even his handsome face and amiable manner failed to break through.

People turned and ran as if they had seen a monster, creating a line of people fleeing from him. It must have been an experience that Gakane Bolunwald had encountered only a few times in his life.

“It wasn’t always like this, was it?”

Yuder quietly asked Nahan, who was following them. Nahan offered a faint smile and a nonchalant shrug.

“Of course not to this extent. It seems the lord must have issued some directive.”

“What should we do? If people keep refusing to answer and avoiding us…”

Yuder turned his gaze to Jimmy, who looked worried as he surveyed the surroundings. Perhaps because he hadn’t slept well and had been exposed to the morning chill while wandering around, the boy’s cheeks seemed a bit more flushed than usual.

Noticing that, Yuder lightly touched Jimmy’s forehead with the back of his hand.

“Uh, Yuder? Why are you doing that?”

“You seem to have a bit of a fever.”

“Fever?”

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Chapter 77

To call it a misconception would have been incorrect; there was indeed a slight feverish warmth to Jimmy. Perhaps recalling what Yuder had mentioned before they arrived here, Gakane quickly approached and clutched both of Jimmy's cheeks.

"Ugh, what's going on?"

After a moment, he subtly nodded his head towards Yuder, casting a secretive glance. It meant that there were no signs of him manifesting his secondary gender yet.

"…It does seem like you have a fever, just like Yuder said. Jimmy, you should have told us if you weren't feeling well."

"I didn't because I feel fine! I'm really okay. This is nothing. You're not planning on sending me back first, are you?"

Jimmy shook his head vigorously and sent pleading looks at Yuder, but Yuder didn't flinch.

Even if it was just a mild fever due to fatigue and overwork, it shouldn't be taken lightly. After all, wasn't it Yuder who was in charge of their party?

"Gakane. Take Jimmy and return to the castle."

"Me? Then what about you…"

Yuder decided to send Gakane along, seeing as the boy wouldn't go back if left alone. Gakane's gaze quickly shifted between Yuder and Nahan behind him.

"Do you think it'll be okay with just the two of you?"

“If anything happens, I’m not the one who should be worried, they should be.”

“That may be true, but…”

Gakane let out a sigh, and after a moment, he opened his mouth while glaring at Nahan.

“Anyway, if you need me, send a signal of fire towards the castle. Even though my body will be there, I can send my shadow clone a considerable distance.”

“Understood.”

Yuder remembered seeing the entirety of the territory from the guest room window they were to stay in and nodded lightly. Even though it seemed unlikely that Gakane would need to send his shadow clone, showing precaution wasn’t a bad thing.

“You two are about to share a bed, and yet you’re acting so stiff.”

“Sleeping? Who? With you?”

At Nahan’s words, Gakane questioned back in astonishment.

“There are only two rooms available, so someone will have to share with me, right?”

“…”

Gakane’s eyelashes trembled a little, as if he hadn’t considered that.

“In that case… I would rather…”

“Let’s discuss this later, we need to move first.”

Yuder raised his hand to stop the pointless conversation from continuing.

“That kind of talk? This is important too, Yuder!”

“Jimmy’s health is more important than that.”

“I am really fine, brother. Please believe me!”

Jimmy, who had been standing with a gloomy face, jumped into the conversation without missing a beat.

“Jimmy.”

After taking a brief look at Nahan, Yuder leaned down towards Jimmy and whispered near his ear.

“I’ve heard that you’ve had a slight fever for some time now. Your condition may have worsened due to fatigue, so rest today.”

“Who, who said that?”

“The Commander.”

As soon as Kishiar’s name was mentioned, Jimmy’s stubbornness immediately faltered. It seemed that he too felt something was off.

“I understand… I’ll go.”

“Rest well today, and if you seem perfectly fine tomorrow, I’ll continue to give you tasks even if you refuse.”

“…Really?”

At Yuder’s words, Jimmy’s head shot up. Yuder looked at the boy’s face, which had begun to light up again, and firmly nodded.

“It would be a loss for me not to utilize the labor I’ve brought with me.”

“Hehe. Fine! Then I’m going straight to sleep. I’m really drowsy, you know.”

Looking at the now-brightened Jimmy, Yuder gestured to Gakane to come closer.

“Even if you don’t feel any signs yet, if you think it might manifest, lay Jimmy down on the bed and move directly to the next room. Then, call me through your shadow clone.”

“Got it. Anything else?”

“When you isolate him, lock the door to Jimmy’s room. And….”

Yuder glanced at Hartan Castle in the distance. Zakail Hartan should have been watching what they were doing by then.

“Keep an eye on Zakail Hartan’s movements within the castle. If he moves anywhere, call me then as well.”

“So you want me to monitor that guy? Fine. I was suspecting him too.”

Gakane seemed to have noticed the suspicious demeanor of Zakail that Yuder had caught onto. After Gakane and Jimmy returned to the castle, Yuder shifted his gaze to Nahan.

“So we’re left alone. What’s your next plan? Are you going to continue searching for the villagers as before?”

“No.”

He had searched for everyone he needed to. But since no one was willing to give information, he was thinking of another approach.

“I’ll look for someone who has no choice but to speak.”

“A person who has no choice but to speak.”

Nahan’s eyes shone with interest.

“Who might that be?”

Instead of answering, Yuder silently pointed at a place. Many people were struggling to clean up a blacksmith shop that had been burned down. Among them were a good number of guards who had been dispatched to maintain the village’s security.

“Guards? They wouldn’t be much help either, would they?”

“They would at least know the exact location of the house or grave of the comrade I was looking for.”

In such a small village, a guard was akin to an official handyman, dealing with all sorts of chores.

Given that they moved according to the Lord’s orders, it would have been impossible for them not to have heard Zakail Hartan’s ‘Please cooperate’ message like the others.

Yuder approached a young guard who had just arrived near a deserted road, struggling to pull a cart full of the burnt bricks.

Sensing a stranger, the guard’s gaze darted toward Yuder before quickly looking away as though he had seen something he wasn’t supposed to see. Whether he acted like this or not, Yuder had already decided to target him.

“I’d like to ask you a question.”

“Can’t you see I’m busy right now? Please move along.”

The voice seemed familiar, and indeed it was the same guard who had led them to the castle the previous night.

“We have come with permission from Zakail himself, who said we could ask anyone…”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

The guard, tired from hauling bricks, flared up in irritation.

“I never heard such a thing, and I’m extremely busy right now. Go ask other people. That should work, shouldn’t it?”

“Understood. I thought that the guards, of all people, would know since this is the future Lord’s order, but if you say so… well… it’s nice to see the free atmosphere of the Hartan guards. Very impressive.”

The young guard’s eyes widened as if feeling the sting in Yuder’s words.

“Ah. By the way, it’s not a big deal, but may I know your name?”

“…Are you, are you threatening me?”

The young guardsman’s eyebrows twitched violently.

“Of course not. I was just curious. Considering we had a connection last night, I thought Zakail might enjoy hearing about you.”

“….”

The young guardsman glanced behind him. There was no one in the busy crowd of villagers paying him any attention. Putting down his cart, he opened his mouth with an angry expression.

“Darn it. What are you trying to ask?”

The fish had finally bitten the bait. Yuder showed him behind a large tree with a cold smile. It was a spot big enough to hide about three people.

“It’ll only take a moment. Follow me.”

They moved behind the tree. Luckily, the large tree, seemingly centuries old, was untouched by the fire.

“Do you know Devran?”

The moment they were all under the shade of the tree, Yuder quickly asked in a low voice. The young guardsman frowned as if he had expected that question.

“…I know him. But I don’t know much about what happened that day.”

“That’s okay. What kind of person was Devran?”

“What kind of person was he?”

“Since you grew up in the same village, I thought you might know him better than we do.”

“Just a… regular… guy.”

The guardsman looked uncomfortably at the ground.

“You seem about the same age, I guess you played together when you were kids.”

Recalling the age of Devran Hartude, which he had heard before coming here, Yuder asked. For the first time, the young guardsman’s eyes briefly fluttered. He seemed about to respond, but ended up shutting his mouth.

“…”

“What was Devran’s family composition?”

Instead of pressing him for an answer, Yuder moved on to the next question.

“Only his father and a younger sister.”

“Good. Can you tell me where Devran’s house is?”

“That’s….”

The young guardsman lifted his head. Yuder followed his gaze, turning around. Behind a few burnt and ragged houses, there was one ruin, particularly charred and untouched. It was the size of a small house.

“That’s it. Just to let you know in advance, there’s nothing left because it all burned.”

“…I see.”

His words seemed to be discouraging, but of course, Yuder had no intention of heeding them. He took note of where the ruin was and then opened his mouth again.

“Were the deceased family members of Devran in there at the time?”

“They said so, so it must be true!”

“So, they wouldn’t have created separate graves.”

The guardsman fell silent for the second time. He gritted his teeth anxiously and finally forced his mouth open.

“Hey, how long are you going to question me? I told you I’m busy.”

“Don’t worry, this is the last question.”

Yuder looked straight ahead.

“Can you tell me how the bodies of convicts are dealt with in Hartan?”

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Chapter 78

“Why…?”

“Surely you don’t expect a guard to be unaware of that.”

There was a hint of hesitation and a great deal of doubt in the eyes of the young guard who had met his gaze squarely. However, Yuder did not clarify the intent of his question.

“Incredible. He is the kind of person who couldn’t help but tell everything.”

After the young guard had given all the answers and hastily left, Nahan, who had been watching him from a step behind all this time, approached Yuder.

“Did you recognize that man as the guard we met last night and targeted him?”

“No.”

However, as a result, the intimidation had been even more effective, which was fortunate. Following Yuder, who walked decisively towards the house where Devran had lived, Nahan continued the conversation.

“I never imagined he would take the threat of revealing his name to Zakail so seriously. Why, though? Even if you told Zakail, he would likely not care, as long as things were going as he wished.”

“Just because the one at the top doesn’t care doesn’t mean those below feel the same way.”

As an example, he referred to the remarkably stern and intimidating old guard captain.

“…I see.”

Nahan’s eyes shone oddly, quickly grasping the meaning behind the words.

“So lower-ranking individuals dislike even being mentioned, for fear it could offend those above them. Hmm. How did you know such a subtle detail? Were you perhaps a member of the imperial army?”

“Do I have to answer that as well?”

Yuder quietly retorted, implying that the one losing out wasn’t him but Nahan. At this, Nahan gave a low chuckle.

“I’m a bit too curious, you see. Especially when I meet a competent brother like you.”

“I would’ve thought I told you there were no brothers like you.”

“Your coldness is almost at the level of a glacier’s breath. Surely, you could share that much.”

“If you want to know, you should start sharing.”

Seemingly annoyed by Nahan’s excessive curiosity and reluctance to share his own information first, Nahan quickly shut his mouth. Silence followed until they reached Devran’s house.

‘Here we are.’

Everything was charred black. The ruins were devastating even from afar, but the horror was more palpable up close. Yuder slowly circled around the ruins, filled with the burnt debris, and inspected it.

The neighboring houses and streets they had seen on the way here were all marked by the same charred traces, but none were as severe as Devran’s house. At least the others hadn’t collapsed like this.

As Yuder returned to his original position and looked down at the chaotic debris, Nahan stood next to him. Yuder glanced at him and then opened his mouth.

“You must have come this far as well, right?”

“I did.”

Nahan casually agreed.

“However, I didn’t discover anything beyond the conjecture that the fire here was more purposefully destructive than elsewhere.”

This was in line with what Yuder had thought. He was certain that the fire which had consumed Devran’s house had been deliberately set.

While the other parts of the village had been only superficially scorched, the fire that had burnt this house down seemed intent on completely annihilating everything. If not, the house wouldn’t have been destroyed to such an extent that its very form was unrecognizable.

“The villagers seem to consider it ominous to even approach this place. The bodies inside must’ve burnt up, so it seems they plan to bury it as is.”

“Well….”

Yuder stared towards the ruinous debris piled high, muttering about the secrets it could potentially hide within.

“Even if the outside has been burned, could the inside be the same?”

“Hmm? Do you mean there might still be a body inside? But it would be difficult to clear these ruins on our own.”

Yuder gave a nonchalant wave of his hand, without turning to look at the puzzled Nahan. Then, a tremendous wind rose silently around the ruins of Devran’s house, starting to lift the debris as one. The ground trembled minutely as if experiencing a mild earthquake, submitting to the immense power before it.

A moment later, they could clearly see the bare floor of Devran’s house, revealed beneath the rubble floating mid-air.

“The inside… surprisingly, it’s rather intact.”

Nahan glanced back and forth between the debris and the floor, murmuring quietly.

“We might be able to find traces of a body inside.”

They looked at each other, then stepped fearlessly into the interior. The old stone floor, hardly burned by the fire, was clean.

However, if two people had indeed died here, there were no signs of their bodies. No bones, no blood, nothing else was visible.

“Most of the debris seems to be furniture, dishes, and cloth from the house. Other than that… is this a shovel?”

As Nahan wandered among the floating debris, he nudged a small shovel with a burnt handle. Yuder approached what seemed to be the area where a door and a wall once stood, stepping over the charred debris.

From the original shape of the floating debris above, it appeared that a bed might have been here.

Then, Yuder noticed something small gleaming amidst the charred wood and cloth. What he grasped in his outstretched hand was a small, round piece of metal.

Although it was difficult to recognize its original form due to the fire, it was certainly a piece of jewelry adorned with a gem.

“What’s that? A brooch?”

“It seems so.”

Yuder examined the object, rolling it in his fingers. It appeared to be an ordinary brooch, but when he put pressure on the end, the inside jingled and twisted ever so slightly. A spark of interest appeared in Yuder’s eyes at this realization.

‘A double brooch?’

Even an ordinary brooch would be a luxury for a commoner, but this one was a double brooch, designed with a hidden compartment.

Yuder remembered seeing such double brooches in his previous life, often used by nobles to store miniature portraits of loved ones. They were always popular for their romantic appeal, though he himself could never quite understand it.

He tried to open the brooch by applying pressure with his fingers, but due to the distortion from the fire, it didn’t open easily. After several attempts, Yuder finally managed to pry it open. Inside, a small portrait revealed itself, fortunately undamaged by the fire.

‘This is……’

Upon seeing the image, Yuder unintentionally furrowed his brow, Nahan peering into the brooch alongside him had a similar reaction.

“A knight donned in a cloak with the insignia of the Hartan family and a cross emblem. There’s only one person who fits that description.”

“…”

Zakail Hartan had said that he had a brother who was a member of the Silver Cross Knight Order.

And Devran Hartude had a father and a younger sister.

Yuder remembered Devran expressing concern to his fellow members that the lord might not grant his request to move their residence due to his sister.

Devran and his family had disappeared, but Zakail Hartan’s brother had not died. The visage of the man in the fine brooch discovered in the ruins of Devran’s house. What did all this signify?

Yuder closed the brooch and tucked it into his chest pocket.

“Get out. I’m going to restore it to its original state.”

“Have we found everything we came to find?”

Quick-witted, Nahan answered and slipped out of the ruins. Yuder followed him out of the burned house, slowly released his power, and returned the remaining debris to their original places.

A large amount of black dust rose with the sound of crumbling, but none of the ashes flew to Yuder, who was enveloped by the wind.

“Where are we heading next? To the back mountain as well?”

“…Yes.”

Before they had arrived, they had heard from a young guard that the bodies of executed convicts were buried casually around a large rock in Mount Clayman, extending behind the Hartan territory.

Even if he committed suicide, Devran was a convict, so his body must have been buried there.

Of course, if he truly died.

No bodies of people who were said to have been burned to death in the house were found, so could Devran’s body really be fully discovered? He felt like he could bet it wouldn’t.

And his thought was confirmed when they reached Mount Clayman after about an hour’s walk.

‘Just as I thought. Nothing.’

They quickly found the large rock used to bury the bodies of the convicts. As the young guard had said, the rock had a bizarre appearance, looking like a monstrous creature standing on two legs and roaring, making it easy to identify. The guard mentioned that the townspeople called it ‘The Rock of Death’.

However, there were no signs around the Rock of Death that suggested something had recently been buried. Just in case, Yuder lightly manipulated the wind and earth to turn the area upside down, but all he found were a few skeletal fragments that seemed to have been buried a very long time ago.

“Over here. Can you come this way?”

Then, Nahan, who had disappeared a short distance away, called Yuder.

“There’s a pit here.”

The pit that Nahan found was closer to the woods than to the area around the rock. It was narrow and deep enough to bury a person, but there was nothing inside it.

“Was it like this from the beginning?”

“No. When I found it, the fallen leaves were… covering it like this.”

Nahan moved his feet to roughly cover the pit with the piles of leaves that had been pushed to the side. It was clear that it had been covered up hastily.

Yuder pushed the leaves aside again and knelt down in front of the revealed pit. When he leaned over to look inside, a foul, damp smell wafted out.

Although the scent was mixed with the strong smell of decaying leaves that had been piled up for a long time, the foul smell was extremely familiar to Yuder.

Yuder reached out and randomly scooped up a handful of dirt from inside the pit. Inside his black gloves, he could see a liquid that had not completely dried out seeping out from between the crumbled soil.

‘Blood.’

There was no doubt about it. It was blood.

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Chapter 79

“Someone was buried here, the blood was spilling. It’s clear that they’re gone. Looking at the circumstances, they didn’t escape on their own, but who took them away?”

After finishing his speculation, similar to Yuder’s, Nahan quietly turned his head to look deep into the forest. It was hard to make out footprints from the long-accumulated pile of leaves, but once he knew that someone had been here, several traces caught his eye.

A young branch that looked broken as if someone had bumped into it, weeds growing in the crevices of rocks that had been stepped on, and faint brown shoe prints on a white stone. Perhaps the brown was a footprint left by stepping on blood.

‘Two… or maybe three.’

Yuder, who guessed the number of people here through these signs, stood up from his place.

“Do you intend to follow?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you think it would be better to return and come back with your companions? We don’t know what kind of enemy lies ahead.”

“It doesn’t matter who’s there.”

Unless it was an Archmage who had trained only in attack magic all his life in the Pearl Tower, or a swordmaster with ample battlefield experience, there were few in this world who could injure Yuder. Considering that Yuder had even more practical experience, he would not easily yield to anyone.

It was more important not to miss the traces they had finally found than fearing an unknown enemy.

“If you’re scared, go back alone.”

“How could you think that? Who do you think discovered this pit? If I were a coward, I wouldn’t have followed you guys in the first place.”

…Then why on earth did he ask such an unnecessary question?… Yuder frowned, thinking him as inscrutable as Kishiar.

He started walking, turning his body as if to say follow if you want, and if not, don’t. Shortly after, he faintly heard Nahan’s footsteps behind him. The traces led them deeper into the mountains, choosing only the paths less travelled by.

“Doesn’t something feel strange?”

Nahan spoke again as they approached a valley, and the radius of the forest began to widen. Yuder, carefully searching for traces, responded roughly.

“What.”

“As we go deeper, the path is getting wider.”

“It might be a place where the path merges with the one used by the people from the nearby village.”

“No. It’s a bit different from that…”

As Nahan mumbled something, he suddenly grabbed Yuder’s arm. At the same time, the air around them wavered, and the color subtly changed.

“What are you doing.”

“Someone is coming.”

Just as he said, a few unfamiliar faces appeared from the opposite path moments later. At a glance, they looked like ordinary hunters, but there was no sight of tools such as snares or daggers for dismantling traps, which are commonly carried by hunters.

They seemed completely oblivious to Yuder and Nahan, casually chatting as they gradually approached.

“Still not talking, huh? Such a stubborn bastard.”

“Yes. Seems like he thinks he’s somebody now that he’s received a surname from the Emperor. He’s too stubborn to speak a word.”

“Tsk. There’s no cure for an old dog. Despite dying, he’s still so full of life. What the hell were the guys who were supposed to control him doing?”

“Apparently he’s one of the capable men that Duke Peletta gathered from all over the Empire. They are trying, but it’s hard. Please understand.”

“Perhaps it would be better to simply handle them moderately and let them go, rather than using the family as bait,” a voice said.

Yuder instinctively realized who they were talking about.

‘Devran.’

Indeed, Devran was still alive. He wasn’t sure if the one dragged away and buried, bleeding in the pit, was Devran, but it was a relief that the path seemed to be leading the right way.

“Ah, and… there’s one more thing I need to report to the Warden.”

“What is it?”

“The youngest Hartan has asked for help. He says Duke Peletta has already sent someone, suspecting something.”

“Someone?”

The man called the Warden stopped in his tracks. Through the branches, a blurry view of brown hair and a face was visible. For a moment, Yuder froze as he realized that this man was from his previous life’s memory.

‘That guy is…’

The Apeto Dukedom, one of the four great dukedoms. In Yuder’s memory, it was a place quieter than the other dukedoms but equally sinister.

The man who was going to receive the title of Duke of Apeto about five years later had the same face as this Warden, who had been his direct subordinate.

Younger than his memory, but it was definitely him. He had seen his face and greeted him several times at the party he had attended as a Cavalry commander.

‘I can’t remember his name, but there’s no doubt about it.’

People from the Apeto Dukedom were in the east, where the Diarca Dukedom’s power was strong. It wasn’t impossible for them to be there, but it was strange to run into them on this mountain, especially since the circumstances made it clear they were the ones who took Devran Hartude.

Without knowing exactly what was going on, Yuder tried to quickly recall his memory while not missing the conversation unfolding before him.

“Yes. They sent four people, all of whom are said to be capable.”

“It’s a bit early, but we did expect them to send such people. If we ignore them, they’ll find nothing and return. Tell him to ignore it. Instead, tell them to pay more attention to his brother!”

“I conveyed as much, but it seems he’s still worried. He was asking us to send someone in case the Diarca side notices something because of their rampaging.”

“We don’t have people to spare. Did he not anticipate even this situation when he betrayed Diarca and killed his own father and sister? He’s the one who reached out to us, blinded by the desire for a small-town lordship. Tsk! Just ignore that coward.”

“Understood.”

“We’ve already found everyone we could find here, and soon we’ll be off, so just dealing with them casually is enough.”

The Warden clicked his tongue and moved on, his expression filled with dissatisfaction.

‘Zakail Hartan betrayed Diarca and joined hands with Apeto, then killed the previous lord and his sister… All for the lordship.’

It was an unexpected story.

‘But even if he’s after the lordship, what does any of this have to do with Devran?’

As he watched the Warden’s party heading uphill, Yuder moved to follow them without realizing it. However, Nahan, who was holding his arm, stopped him.

“Don’t get any closer.”

“…”

“Although we had covered ourselves with an illusion to appear as trees, there could still be those who were sensitive enough to notice our presence.”

A murmuring, as though someone were saying ‘like you,’ seemed to drift on the edge of hearing.

Just then, one of the men who had silently followed the group, dressed as a hunter, suddenly turned his head and looked toward Yuder and Nahan.

“Over there!”

“What?”

“I heard something from over there!”

It appeared that Nahan’s advice had come too late. The men dressed as hunters took up a defensive stance all at once, and the Warden also turned his body, revealing a cold gaze.

“Who’s there! Reveal yourself!”

Although they had not yet detected the illusion, it was only a matter of time until they did, now that they knew something was there. Yuder subtly moved his right hand to rest on the hilt of the practice sword loosely hanging at his waist.

“… Count to three and then dispel the illusion.”

“Are you planning to handle all of them by yourself?”

“It’s not a problem, just keep track of the time.”

Yuder etched the number and positions of the people in front of him into his mind and began to count quietly.

“One… two….”

“Ha! Okay, we come out. What now?”

His count to three was cut off. Yuder, hand still resting on the hilt of his sword, turned around. Two people were emerging from behind the rocks near where Yuder and Nahan were standing.

One person was unknown, but the other was very familiar. He was Kiolle Da Diarca, a member of the Diarca family and a knight from the Imperial Knights.

‘…Why is he here?’

“You guys are pretty quick on the uptake. What are you doing here?”

“…”

“I am Senior Knight Kiolle Da Diarca of the Imperial Knights. This is one of the places where the Imperial Knights come to train every year, under the auspices of the Diarca family. I have never heard of people like you staying here. Who are you?”

Kiolle’s gaze was as arrogant as ever. As he scrutinized the people from the Apeto dukedom, the Warden stepped forward. Yuder could see an intense whirl of emotions stirring ceaselessly within his eyes.

“Ah, so you are the knights of the Imperial Knights. I’ve heard much about your reputation. Have you come here… hmm. For training?”

“Didn’t you hear what I just said? That’s right!”

“We’re just passing hunters… we’ll leave soon. So please don’t be too angry.”

Given that he didn’t know how much Kiolle had heard, the Warden seemed to have decided to play dumb. However, all Kiolle saw in his eyes was a hint of contempt.

“Hunters, huh. Do you think I’d believe that?”

“…It’s true. We are……”

“Dogs of Apeto daring to venture this far without fear. You must not fear death. I’ll figure out what kind of tricks you’ve been pulling here and report it to my father.”

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Chapter 80

The Warden’s expression changed at the mention of dogs of Apeto. The numerous worries that had been lurking over his downcast face seemed to dissipate into the cold air.

“…Did you hear what we said?”

“Yes, I heard!”

“I see. Do you happen to know where the other knights who came here for training are now?”

“Why are you asking about those bastards?”

“Well…”

Touching his ear and stalling, the Warden signaled the others around him with a nod and gave a chilly smile.

“I’m curious how long it would take for them to notice if the idiot youngest of the Diarca family disappeared from here.”

“What?”

“Just take care of it and don’t worry about it! After all, there’s only two of them!”

“Yes!”

Excluding the Warden and his closest subordinate, eight men all stepped forward at once. Yuder soon understood why most of them did not hold weapons.

Out of the three who had drawn their weapons, the others began to showcase threatening auras. Their hands and feet began to

grotesquely transform as elemental powers like fire and water began to manifest.

“…So five of the Awakeners have joined.”

In the momentary standoff, Nahan, who had grabbed Yuder’s shoulder, moved him aside and murmured in a low voice.

“I think I might have an idea where my missing brothers have gone.”

“Ki, Kiolle sir! There are too many enemies! Are you really going to confront them like this? It would be better if we first retreated…!”

From behind Kiolle, a panicked knight panted out. His hand, holding the sword, trembled, suggesting that he was barely experienced in real combat.

“You’re talking nonsense, Paviel. Members of the Diarca never retreat in front of vermin like these. Let alone, there are some among them who possess powers that I absolutely can’t forgive. And you’re telling me to retreat? Obviously, they all have to die!”

“But…!”

“Paviel. If you’re thinking of turning your back on me now, even if you survive, Diarca will never forgive you. Are you scared of those vermin, spewing fire and strutting around with the power gifted by the Red Stone?”

At the mention of “vermin spewing fire”, Kiolle gnashed his teeth.

‘…Hmm. That’s probably… because of me.’

Yuder felt an odd sensation as he belatedly realized that the source of Kiolle’s intense anger, which had clouded his judgment,

might have been due to their past interactions. The young knight appeared to still be in a state of confusion.

"…"

A mixture of terror and resentment flickered across the knight named Paviel's face.

"No…"

"That's right. That's how it should be. I knew you were here to monitor me under my father's orders. He probably promised you a promotion. But, in the end, that promise ends if I object. Understand?"

"Yes…"

"This is the only time your noble background, being from the Han family, will be useful."

Kiolle's icy words echoed as his gaze turned towards the enemy, who was charging at him with arms transformed into swords.

"In the end, they are too scared of the consequences to kill us! They're all talk! Go!"

…Well, they might be able to kill you… Yuder felt a twinge of regret that he couldn't voice his thoughts as he watched them clash.

Though the group consisted of five Awakeners, and three quite skilled swordsmen, Kiolle and his fellow knight fought admirably.

Watching Kiolle hold his own against the Awakeners, Yuder thought that the experiences he had endured, though they had knocked him unconscious, might not have been entirely useless.

Judging by their previous exchanges, it seemed that the arrogant knight from the Diarca family had been here for training by sheer

coincidence. Mentions of other knights suggested that they might be in the vicinity as well. The longer the battle dragged on, the more disadvantageous it would be for Apeto's side.

"Damn it. They just had to show up for training right now… this is getting annoying. Damn Diarca, causing trouble in his entire life."

They've heard the place where the knights in training are staying is far from here. Nobody, not even the Warden, would have thought they'd run into them here. That's why there weren't any orders for them to move from above.

As Kiolle and his subordinates fought, the Warden of the Apeto family and his subordinates, standing not too far away, expressed their anger loudly.

"What on earth did that man do in the capital to come here all of a sudden?"

"From what I know, he's been causing continuous trouble and disorder within the Imperial Knights. It's said that the Duke himself sent him here for training to calm the resentment built up in his heart."

"Resentment, my foot. Does that guy look like someone who'd have something built up in his heart? It's more like he's building resentment in the hearts of others! He's an ignorant youngster who doesn't know how high the sky is, thanks to his well-connected father!"

Yuder agreed with what he heard, empathizing greatly with the angry voice of the Warden.

"We cannot let him live once he hears the name 'Apeto'. Kill him here to prevent any future problems. Push harder! What are you doing against just two opponents!"

At the sharp cry of the Warden, the movements of the fighters paused momentarily, then resumed with even more intensity.

Though their abilities were suitable for combat, they lacked experience. Fighting without disturbing several comrades in a forest filled with obstacles required tact, something they seemed to lack.

‘… Did they gather those who just awakened? They are incredibly clumsy.’

Kiolle and his fellow knight remained surprisingly composed against them. However, as the enemies started to charge desperately after the Warden’s order, they were quickly overwhelmed.

“U-uh, Sir Kiolle! We should retreat and scatter them!”

“… Retreating now will do no good! What on earth did you learn in the Imperial Knight!”

Even in this critical moment, Kiolle was stubborn. His judgment wasn’t bad, but ultimately two people couldn’t face eight.

‘If they had turned and run from the start, picking off the scattered enemies, they might have had a chance.’

Kiolle’s excessive hatred for the Awakeners ended up ruining everything. Yuder watched as wounds gradually accumulated on Kiolle and his fellow knight, contemplating what to do next.

He definitely needed to capture one from the Apeto side for information, but he hesitated on what to do about Kiolle’s side.

If he left them to die, there was a high risk that the Diarca Ducal House, who would likely learn about the knight group’s presence in the nearby village, would stir up trouble. However, revealing himself to save them could lead to repercussions from Kiolle himself later on.

‘I thought he was a man who would die quickly in my previous life because he didn’t stand out… But at least back then, he wouldn’t have died here.’

In a way, the entire vacation time of the Cavalry caused by Yuder had twisted the situation up to this point.

“Tch!”

“What the hell are you doing, Paviel!”

Then, another great uproar arose around Kiolle, who was in the midst of fighting. Yuder, whose eyes had been lost in thought, looked up and felt a surprising emotion upon seeing the subordinate knight step forward, drop his weapon, and raise both hands.

“It can’t be helped. Kiolle, you are a Diarca, I don’t want to die here because of your stupidity! I’m surrendering, so spare me!”

The subordinate knight, more severely wounded than Kiolle, was covered in countless wounds on his right arm and both legs. Deciding it was too hard to hold his sword any longer, it appeared he had chosen to betray Kiolle and attempt surrender.

“…You dishonor our knighthood!”

“The one who doesn’t know shame is you, Kiolle! Why should I die because of you! Because of you, a bastard, who relies solely on the power of your family!”

“What… did you say?”

Kiolle raised his sword to strike down the knight in a fit of fury. But the Warden’s hand was quicker. As soon as he raised his hand, one of the henchmen, dressed like a hunter and holding a sword, blocked Kiolle’s attack. The clash of metal against metal echoed as Kiolle dropped his sword.

The surroundings fell silent as the battle calmed down for a moment.

“Ha… This is something. I didn’t anticipate this.”

The Warden looked at the knight who had surrendered and gave a grim smile.

“So there is a knight like you who knows what’s practical in the honorable Imperial Knights. I wouldn’t have wanted to die for such a person either. I understand.”

“…”

“You said spare me… I can spare you. But I can’t show sympathy without any compensation. Why should I spare you when I could kill both of you?”

“Anything… I’ll do anything. I’ll keep the secrets.”

“Paviel, you…”

Kiolle’s eyes twitched in disbelief. However, the subordinate knight didn’t look back at him, just kept his head bowed.

The Warden seemed greatly amused by this and burst into hearty laughter.

“Ha, ha, ha… This is truly a sight to behold. Noble knights who vowed to serve God and pledge loyalty betraying each other… Especially when one is a thorn in the side like Diarca.”

“…”

Yuder saw the Warden move his snake-like thin eyes and give a subtle signal to his subordinates who were lined up around him. He then continued nonchalantly.

“Does anyone know that you knights came here?”

“Eight other knights who came here with us know. But they won’t come looking for us.”

“Why?”

At the Warden’s question, the subordinate knight clenched his lips with an enraged expression.

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Chapter 81

“It’s all because of Kiolle. He stormed out in protest of this training…”

“Hmm. So, you were forced to follow such a lad and ended up running into us. That’s unfortunate indeed.”

If he had arrived just a little later, or if he had stayed quiet where he was, none of this unpleasantness would have happened. The Warden’s words made the subordinate knight grind his teeth in agreement, bowing his head even lower.

“So, you didn’t know we were here?”

“We honestly didn’t.”

“How much of our conversation did you overhear?”

“…I heard from the part where you mentioned four Awakeners. But I didn’t listen properly. I only heard Apeto’s name because Kiolle recognized one of your faces and got angry. I didn’t know who your family was.”

“He recognized the face?”

The steward turned to glare at Kiolle, his face wrinkled in annoyance. Kiolle met his gaze defiantly, still bleeding yet unbowed.

“Did you see us before, you idiot of the Diarca family?”

“That’s right. That brat behind you, the one always accompanying the second of the Apeto family. The audacious one who dared to spill alcohol on my shoes!”

At Kiolle’s words, the man next to the Warden looked taken aback, apparently surprised that Kiolle truly remembered him.

“…So, you have a better memory than I thought.”

“Do you take me for a fool? I intended to punish him at that time, but that cunning scoundrel managed to sneak you away and we moved on. I may forget other things, but never something like that!”

Through Kiolle’s outburst, it became clear to everyone that he never forgot even the smallest of grudges.

‘Weak and arrogant, yet never forgets a grudge… Those types are the most bothersome.’

Yuder sighed softly, recalling the two times he had knocked down the man. The Warden also seemed to share the same thought, rolling his narrow eyes in contemplation.

“Was it Paviel? Thanks to you, it seems like we have less trouble, so we express our gratitude.”

“Then…!”

Just as the subordinate knight was about to lift his head as if he wanted to ask if he was going to be spared, his voice abruptly cut off. A hunter-clad Awakener had quietly approached and swiftly pierced his neck.

“Co, ugh!”

The subordinate knight clutched at his throat as he collapsed. Amidst the spurting blood, he quickly breathed his last.

“Paviel…! Urgh!”

“Knock him out and bring him along. There shouldn’t be any repercussions, so we should extract some information about Diarca

before killing him.”

Yuder watched as the hunters carried Kiolle, who had collapsed after being hit on the head, next to Paviel’s lifeless body, treating them like mere baggage.

Only after the noise had sufficiently subsided did Nahan remove his hand from Yuder’s shoulder. The surroundings, which had seemed slightly faded, returned to their original vivid colors. The illusion ability that had been hiding their presence had ended.

Yuder slowly moved forward, looking down at the ground stained with blood from Paviel’s corpse.

“Taking the corpse, they must be planning to make him disappear without a trace.”

Seeing the blood-stained ground, Nahan muttered to himself, briefly turning his gaze away. Yuder immediately shook his head to contradict his words.

“No, they’re probably trying to manipulate the culprit.”

What they wanted was to interrogate Kiolle about the Diarca Ducal Family, extract as much information as they could, then kill and dispose of him. The best way to avoid raising the Diarca’s suspicions was to create a separate perpetrator.

The easiest option would be to frame the deceased knight, but if that wasn’t feasible, they would likely shift their focus to the Cavalry staying in Hartan. There was a good chance they had already considered this far. Either way, it didn’t bother Yuder much.

‘First, follow them and confirm their destination, then…’

“Apeto. Diarca. According to what I know, these are all names of prestigious ducal families. Am I right?”

As he continued his thoughts, preparing to follow the people of the Apeto family who had taken Kiolle and disappeared, Yuder turned his head at the sudden question.

Somehow, the illusion that had enveloped him was now completely dispelled, revealing his original form. One of his grey eyes, visible beneath his dark blue hair that resembled the night sky, stared intently at Yuder.

“…Yes, you’re right.”

“That’s surprising. My brothers always said that the nobles here just hate the emperor, but their relationships with each other are quite strong. But it seems it’s not quite so.”

“…”

The people of the Apeto family, behaving suspiciously in a region under the strong influence of the Diarca, were bold enough to attempt to kill a member of the Diarca family that found them. Seeing this, it would be natural to think they were not in good terms, but Yuder’s thoughts differed.

In his past life, while serving as the emperor’s confidant, he had seen many aspects of the Four Great Ducal Houses. To Yuder, they appeared like a legendary serpent monster with many heads but one body.

They constantly bit and fought each other for better prey, but their survival as a whole always took precedence.

For instance, even if it were revealed that the Apeto family killed Kiolle, the son of the Diarca family, the Diarca wouldn’t openly protest to the Apeto family.

They might take small, private revenge beneath the surface, but they would never let it escalate into a major feud between the

families. That was the tacit rule of the Four Great Ducal Houses, handed down for a thousand years since the founding of the Empire.

‘As long as order is maintained, glory is everlasting.’

That’s what the Emperor Yuder served in his past life once said about this fact. Therefore, he shouldn’t conclude from this incident alone that relations between the ducal families were bad.

They were a very strange group, killing each other one moment, yet willing to sacrifice their lives to protect each other in different matters.

However, he wasn’t inclined to explain such complex facts to Nahan in detail. As Yuder remained silent, Nahan soon changed the subject.

“The risk of being discovered from now on will be much higher than before. We don’t know how many more of our brothers are in the direction they’re heading. But you’re going to continue, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

Yuder’s answer was short and concise. Nahan slightly raised the corners of his mouth, as if he had expected this response, and promptly restored his illusion.

They continued to climb deeper into the mountains, following the traces of the people from the Apeto family. Thanks to the large number of people moving at once, footprints and bloodstains were more distinct, making it much easier to trace them. It was fortunate.

“Look, it leads into a cave over there.”

Their trail led deep into the valley, finally ending inside a cave. It was cleverly hidden between the rocks, so much so that without the

blood droplets marking the path, they might never have found it.

Upon listening closely, they could faintly hear the sound of human voices echoing from within. The source was unquestionably there.

‘We’ve confirmed the location, so we can return and contact Gakane and Jimmy…’

However, the presence of many more people inside than they had anticipated made them wary. Although there was no immediate need to make contact, the people inside the cave might never be found again if not sought out now. Yuder composed himself and turned to Nahan.

“Could we hide ourselves again as we did earlier and enter?”

“I’m not sure. It’s easy to hide in a forest by blending with the trees, but in a cave, it’s difficult to figure out what we could disguise ourselves as.”

“That does sound challenging.”

Yuder decided they would incapacitate anyone they encountered as soon as they entered. At times like these, the best strategy was to launch stones with the wind.

“What are you looking for?”

“A stone to launch.”

“You’re going to throw a stone? Why?”

“Because if we can’t hide and enter, it’s faster to knock everyone we meet unconscious.”

At Yuder’s explanation, Nahan made a strange expression.

“I guess you’re not joking.”

“I don’t do pointless things.”

“…In that case, we might not have to wait very long. Someone is coming out from within.”

True to his words, the voices from within the cave were growing louder. A shadow began to stir, prompting Yuder and Nahan to hide amongst the dense trees.

Two of the hunter-dressed underlings, who had followed the man they’d called ‘Warden’ earlier, emerged from within. Yuder guessed they had come out to fetch water, noticing the large water jugs in their hands.

‘Were they both Awakeners… This works in our favor.’

Yuder felt around with his foot, picking up two small pebbles. As he threw them, he employed the full force of the wind.

Soon after, there was a sound akin to fruit being struck by a stone, followed by the two men collapsing onto the ground. Yuder approached them and thoroughly examined their unconscious bodies.

“Did you kill them?”

“They’re only unconscious.”

Yuder responded to Nahan’s question while searching through the unconscious men’s belongings, finding a small dagger and a few cigarettes. It seemed they had not just come out for water, but had intended to have a smoke and rest as well.

‘Nothing much of note here.’

Using the dagger, Yuder ripped pieces from their clothes to tie up their hands and legs, then stuffed cloth into their mouths. He hid

them well behind the same trees they had concealed themselves in earlier. After this, he turned to Nahan, who had been observing the entire scene, without any hesitation.

“You mentioned earlier that you didn’t know what to disguise ourselves as inside the cave.”

Nahan’s eyes widened slightly as if realizing what Yuder was about to say. A look of astonishment, or perhaps incredulity, flitted across them, only to disappear shortly after.

“That’s right.”

“It seems we have figured it out now.”

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Nahan gently closed and opened his hand, his figure shifting to resemble one of the unconscious individuals. Yuder couldn't see his own appearance, but he looked down at his body, which seemed to be wearing unfamiliar clothes, and realized that the illusion ability had been properly applied.

They pocketed the personal items of the unconscious ones and entered the cave with their water containers. The outside was so dense that it seemed impossible to see an inch ahead, but unexpectedly, it was not so dark inside.

Following an obviously artificially carved path, they were taken aback as someone suddenly stuck out his face from within. It was a man they hadn't met before.

"Huh? Who are you guys? Did you already return from fetching water?"

Yuder didn't respond immediately. Neither did Nahan. Seeing this, the man's face twisted into an annoyed expression.

"Ah, I see. You didn't even get water and just came back smoking your pipes? You're caught now. Today, I can finally show the Warden how useless you guys are! Hand over your water container! Show it to me!"

The man rolled up his sleeves and confidently approached them. Yuder subtly used his power to fill the empty water containers that he and Nahan were holding in a flash.

If Nahan had stumbled due to the suddenly heavy water container, they would have been immediately exposed. However,

Nahan merely glanced at Yuder once, standing firm without any significant movement.

“I’ve disliked you since you were selected just because you could use some insignificant ability. What do you think is so great about you guys? You’re no different from the guys locked up in there! All of you are nothing but liars…!”

The man, who was coming towards them all fired up, fell silent instantly when he saw the water container filled to the brim.

“…Huh?”

“Can we go now?”

In the brief moment the man was stupefied, Yuder quickly responded in a low, indifferent voice.

“Uh… uh huh. How did you manage to get water in such a short time…”

“Let’s go.”

Leaving the shocked man behind, Yuder emptied the water from the container again. Similar incidents occurred with several others, but no one was able to discern their disguises.

Through the disgusted gazes of the others, Yuder was able to glean some information about this place.

Inside this cave, several Awakeners were imprisoned. The person they called the Warden was said to be ‘selecting’ these Awakeners. The individuals Yuder and Nahan were disguised as were Awakeners specially employed to protect the Warden who was doing dangerous things.

‘Just based on the revealed information, it’s clear this isn’t an ordinary place.’

Although he didn’t show it, Yuder was internally astonished. He already knew in his previous life that there were nobles who used the Awakeners like slaves.

However, that was considered akin to buying skilled slaves from other countries, hence it was treated as private affairs of the high-ups that couldn’t be infringed upon.

In this era, where only about two years had passed since the Awakeners had revealed themselves to the world, he had never heard of a family capturing Awakeners on such a large scale.

‘Selection, huh? What are they planning to do with the selected Awakeners? In my previous life, the Apeto family was consistently loyal to the emperor and never caused any major incidents related to the Awakeners…’

Could the Apeto family really have been involved in something like this? Yuder furrowed his brows, recalling Nahan’s words, ‘In the East, it’s common for Awakeners to be falsely accused and disappear after being arrested’.

If those who had been caught experienced a similar ordeal, it meant that at least two noble families in the eastern region were engaging in such activities, targeting the Awakeners.

‘I wonder if Kishiar was aware of this.’

Had he known, given his nature, he would have certainly mentioned it before sending Yuder. Yuder, who had lived several years longer than Kishiar, hadn’t known about such occurrences in his previous life, indicating there was a high chance that Kishiar too hadn’t known. This led to a certain speculation.

‘Even though they had kidnapped the Awakeners, either their intended purposes hadn’t been achieved, or perhaps they were achieved sooner than expected, and they felt no need to maintain these places any longer, quickly closing them down.’

In his previous life, the missions Yuder had been directly assigned were nearly always the most dangerous, involving handling monstrous threats or the assassination and capture of rebels.

After becoming the Cavalry Commander, the Emperor told Yuder not to take interest in anything other than what he was specifically ordered to, and strictly prohibited him from taking independent action without permission.

Even if not for that command, Yuder hadn’t had the leeway to divert his attention elsewhere, busy as he was with managing the Cavalry, the most dangerous group on the continent.

It was only when several years had passed since his rise to the position of Commander and he started doubting whether there might be some hidden motive behind the events happening all around the world, that he was able to shift his focus outward.

In the blind spots he hadn’t had a chance to look into in his previous life, what were they trying to achieve by doing such things?

“…A fork in the path.”

Nahan spoke quietly to Yuder, who was deep in thought while walking. True to his word, there was a fork in the path before them. According to the information given by those they had encountered before, the left path led to a prison, while the right led to the space where the Warden and others stayed.

“To the left.”

Yuder promptly decided the direction, feeling around the cave floor and picking up a few pebbles to put in his pocket.

The path leading to the prison was steep and exceptionally winding. They hadn't placed many magic stones to provide light, so it was extremely dark. They had to feel their way along the wall to move forward.

"Who goes there?"

After walking for a while, they came across three Awakeners sitting in the middle of the path. Recognizing them as the underlings of the Warden they had encountered earlier, Yuder felt dismayed.

'They must know the owners of these disguises… they'll discover us soon.'

If they were discovered, they could knock them out, but dealing with Awakeners was tricky. If they didn't succeed in one hit, a ruckus could arise.

As Yuder was contemplating throwing a stone from his pocket, the seated Awakeners spoke with bored expressions.

"Number 2, Number 4. It's not time for shift change yet, why are you here early? And what's with that water container?"

"You said you were going out for a smoke. Don't tell me that red-haired old man started a fight again?"

'These guys… don't they call each other by name? Lucky.'

Yuder, releasing his grip on the tightly held water container, calmly opened his mouth.

"Well, something like that."

“I knew it. That crazy old man. Does he think we’re here because we like it? I’d have killed him before he got me in here.”

“The conditions are terrible. Why on a day like today, after fighting to the death, without proper treatment, we’re trapped in this sunless underground?”

“Exactly, my wounded arm still hurts.”

As if they had been waiting to speak, the three of them started to argue at the same time. Then, from the dark corridor, there were a few small sounds like a suppressed groan of a beast. The Awakeners continued talking, not paying any attention, but Yuder felt the sound was very unsettling.

“What’s that noise, Number 3?”

“I’m Number 1. Number 3 is with the Warden.”

Yuder had randomly picked a number to draw the others’ attention to his question, but unfortunately, he called for someone who wasn’t present. Yuder quickly changed his approach.

“Sorry, I have a condition where I can’t see well in the dark. What’s that noise, Number 1?”

“It’s the whimpering of the young man from the noble family we caught earlier. But did you have such a condition?”

…Ah, so I’m Number 2… Yuder nodded his head, trying to remember the nickname of his character.

“Yes, I mentioned it before. Try to remember. So, has he been like this since then?”

“Yeah. It’s so annoying. Doesn’t that boy know when to give up? He should save his energy, since he’s going to die anyway. Among

those trapped here, he’s probably the worst.”

“If it weren’t for the Warden’s orders, I would have shut him up.”

Kiolle da Diarca seemed to attract no sympathy even for a stranger he had just met.

‘Impressive if nothing else.’

Thanks to the continuous, grim, and desperate whimpering of Kiolle, the atmosphere among the Awakeners became more relaxed.

The three Awakeners seemed to have stopped doubting Yuder and Nahan. Yuder, while casually agreeing with their trivial chat, pointed towards the inside as if he found something.

“Wait, is that guy…?”

“Huh? …Eek!”

“What…Ugh!”

Although his voice lacked any surprise, fortunately, the Awakeners fell for it. As they turned their heads in surprise, three stones flew and hit the back of their heads.

Looking down at the three Awakeners who fell without making a sound, Yuder signaled to Nahan who had been quietly standing.

“Number 4. Search their pockets quickly.”

“I’m Number 4?”

“I’m Number 2, so you must be Number 4.”

Even though Nahan looked as if he might say something, he didn’t utter a word. He kneeled down and rummaged through the

pockets of the Awakeners, finding a bundle of keys. Yuder took them and moved forward decisively.

Not long after, several small rooms with solid iron doors appeared. They were designed with iron bars at the top to allow looking inside.

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Chapter 83

“Devran Hartude. Is Devran Hartude here?”

“…”

Even after the voice echoed, the prison remained eerily quiet. Even Kiolle’s groans had subsided, intensifying the grim atmosphere.

“Devran Hartude. I am a Cavalry member here to rescue you. The Commander has ordered me to bring you. If you’re here, answer.”

Having said that, Yuder quietly counted in his mind. He planned to open all the doors at once if there was no response after counting to a hundred.

Fortunately, around the count of ten, someone from inside a cell drew a ragged breath and spoke.

“Are, really, Cavalry?”

Suspicion and trembling could be felt from the exhausted voice. Yuder moved toward the cell where the voice originated, fumbling with a bunch of keys.

“Devran. Is that really you?”

Before inserting the key, he asked for final confirmation. A dark shadow within the cell sluggishly stirred. With a voice that sounded strangled, as if at the brink of death, the figure managed to speak.

“…Yes. I am, Dev, ran.”

Yuder glanced back at Nahan and gave a subtle nod. The man, understanding the signal to disable the illusion ability, immediately moved his hand to dispel the power.

Yuder began to unlock the door with the keys he held. Fortunately, on the third attempt, the lock clicked open with a metallic sound.

The cell was narrow and filthy. Amidst the stench of blood and waste, a single person was sitting. Yuder halted when he saw the man's hands and feet bound by iron chains that looped through two rings on the upper part of the wall, constricting his neck.

Yuder was well aware of this method of binding. The victim's hands and feet were stretched painfully until the chain around the neck loosened just enough, only to strangle the victim if they relaxed even slightly.

It was one of the methods used on the most dangerous criminals. Yuder, having experienced it in his past life, knew all too well the malicious agony it inflicted.

A criminal bound this way couldn't even sleep properly. If they relaxed their strained limbs due to fatigue, they would be strangled to death.

The reason why most people trapped in this prison could barely make a noise was that they were all bound in the same way. Yuder grimaced at the scene more brutal than he expected and drew the practice sword attached to his waist.

"It's, impossible. This chain isn't, ordinary…"

Devran tried to articulate that ordinary strength wouldn't be able to break the chain, but Yuder's sword touched the chain and cut it faster than he could finish.

With a clanging sound, his arms lost their strength and fell to the ground. The chain around his neck lost its purpose. Devran managed to gasp, his suppressed cough exploding out.

“Cough, cough!”

Yuder conjured up some light to illuminate the cell further. He wanted to get a clearer look at Devran’s face.

“Devran. Can you see my face?”

“I, I can. Yuder, of the, Shin….”

Devran indicated that he had managed to recognize Yuder, despite his ragged, labored breaths. His condition was grim, marred by blood and filth, yet no signs of permanent damage or broken bones were visible. Whoever had handled Devran had not intended to kill him; this much had become clear.

“Yes, your mind seems to be intact, that’s good. Now tell me, what happened to you?”

“…”

At those words, Devran wore a deeply pained expression. His hand, full of wounds, but once likely robust, clutched at the hem of Yuder’s garment. Between his disheveled hair, an anger smoldered in his uniquely brown eyes.

“…I was, tricked. It was, a trap, from the start…”

Tricked? By whom?

Yuder knelt on one knee, directly meeting Devran’s gaze.

“By whom?”

“They tried, to sell off, Dermilla, while I was away. So, I…!”

“Hold on. It’s hard to understand you. Try to answer concisely.”

Yuder gently patted Devran’s shoulder, who was unable to hide his agitation even as he was coughing. Underneath his calm voice, Devran shot a resentful glance at him but quickly quieted down when Yuder created a small ball of water in mid-air.

“Drink this first.”

“…Thank you.”

After swallowing the ball of water that Yuder had placed in his mouth, Devran took a moment to catch his breath. His eyes became markedly calmer. Only then did Yuder recognize that Devran was ready for a proper conversation and calmly asked,

“Start from when you went on leave. What happened?”

“…Alright. After getting leave, I went straight to my hometown.”

Devran’s story could be summed up as follows: He had not informed his family beforehand about his leave, so upon his arrival, he noticed a strange atmosphere among the surprised villagers. The reason became clear once he reached his home.

‘Devran, my boy! The Lord has ordered your sister, Dermilla, to marry a man from the neighboring village!’

His father, whose one leg had been impaired due to an accident from his youth, clung to Devran, shedding tears.

‘The man she’s supposed to marry is a widowed blacksmith known for his rough temper, who’s killed two people! When Dermilla resisted, he locked her up in the castle. They say they’ll keep her until the wedding day and then send her off. What are we to do?’

Devran felt his world darken. What he had feared had finally come to pass.

His father didn’t know, but his younger sister had fallen in love with Zachlis, the Lord’s eldest son, a long time ago. However, Zachlis, knowing his father would never approve of his marriage to a commoner, had enlisted in a Knight Order far away to avoid his father’s watchful eyes.

Upon settling there, he had promised to come back for Dermilla, a promise she had shared with Devran. He remembered the anger he felt when he heard this.

That’s why Devran was overjoyed when he was accepted into the Cavalry, even if it meant his awakened powers were known and he had to endure the scorn from his village. He had no trust in nobles; he only wanted to get his family out as soon as the opportunity arose.

In that process, he considered the worst-case scenario to be Zachlis pressuring the Lord to prevent him from leaving. But he had not anticipated things would turn sour this quickly.

What would have happened if he hadn’t taken his leave? He felt suffocated.

“Sir Zachlis? Is he not in the village at present?”

“Why him? He, of course, must still be with the knight order…”

There was no mistaking it: somehow, the relationship between the Lord’s eldest son and the commoner girl had been discovered. Despite not knowing why, seeing the Lord maliciously trying to send Dermilla to the neighboring village made it clear.

Could it be that the Lord just wanted to get rid of Dermilla? It might be early, but what if he went to him and asked if they could

leave for the capital together with their family?

The request that he had already intended to make had merely been expedited, and it was not like the Lord wanted to have a dispute with him, and made a foe of the Cavalry.

Devran had faith in the presence of the Cavalry behind him and the name of the Duke of Peletta, Kishiar La Orr.

“I went to the castle of the Lord. Though the Lord himself wouldn’t meet me because he was unwell, his eldest daughter, Zupiel, who came to inherit the title, thought it would be better to listen to me. Thanks to her, I was able to return home safely with Dermilla. I decided to take my father and Dermilla to the capital when my vacation ended. But that night… the Lord called for me again.”

He had a bad feeling about it. Devran told his father and sister not to leave the house and headed alone for the Lord’s castle. However, what he faced upon entering the castle was a fierce fire, as if to swallow the entire castle.

“It was obvious at a glance that it wasn’t an ordinary fire. There was an Awakener who could wield fire there that day.”

Devran not only had the ability to summon fire, but also to control an existing one to some extent. However, no matter how hard he tried, the fire spread uncontrollably, almost as if it had a will of its own.

He was captured by the villagers who, misunderstanding him as the culprit, rushed at him in anger. He was thrown into prison, confused and worried about his father and sister.

“The next day, Zakail, the Lord’s youngest son, returned and declared me guilty. And then, I…”

After being beaten to near-death in prison, Devran was buried alive near the Rock of Death, where prisoners were buried, with a sack over his face, at a time when he couldn't tell if it was day or night. When he woke up, he was here.

'Are you awake? Let's have a chat now.'

A strange man greeted the conscious Devran. He introduced himself as one who followed the 'High One.'

'I was doing some tedious work before you showed up.'

Through the man and his subordinates, Devran learned a lot. They were expanding the power of the Duke of Apeto secretly in the East, where the support of the Diarca ducal family was strong.

They had been attending to the request of a 'Contractor' who had agreed to support them and joined hands, when Devran suddenly appeared.

'You're kind of special among all the Awakeners. It's a stroke of luck, being able to capture the confidant of the cunning Duke Peletta.'

The man wanted to extract information about the Cavalry and Duke Peletta from Devran. But Devran never opened his mouth.

The Cavalry was the place that had saved his life, and the Emperor and Commander Kishiar were the ones who had acknowledged him for the first time. He had lived in contempt as a commoner, but he vowed never to betray.

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Chapter 84

When they realized their scheme had been exposed, they changed their methods. They attempted to persuade him using the lives of his father and younger sister as bait and subjected him to severe torture, just shy of breaking his bones.

Moreover, they had attached a magic bomb to his body, which would instantly detonate upon detecting any use of his abilities, rendering him powerless.

Devran could only hope that they would sense something was wrong when he failed to return to the Cavalry.

He cherished his family, but he hated the thought of betraying the Cavalry just as much. Incredibly, his heart had hardened in the mere months since he joined the Cavalry to an extent he could hardly believe himself.

And now, the hope sent by the Commander himself had truly appeared before him.

Devran knew that the man with black hair standing before him was the most skilled among the 330 Cavalry members. The fact that he had come felt like faith and salvation given to him by Commander Kishiar, and he couldn’t help but shed tears. His patience and faith had not been in vain.

“Using the lives of your family as a threat… Did they show you proof that they are alive?”

“No. But I heard their voices. From outside where I’m held…”

The man named Yuder Aile spoke these chilling words with an incredibly cool demeanor, neither showing pity nor contempt for

Devran.

In the past, Devran had thought his coldness distasteful from afar, perhaps due to his exceptional abilities. But now, he couldn't have felt more reassured by his attitude.

"On the day of the fire, did you see who the real perpetrator was?"

"I didn't see. But I know who it was."

"Who was it?" Yuder asked coldly.

"Subordinates of a man called the Warden. One used wind, and the other used fire. They mentioned having a hard time controlling the elements…"

"I think I know who you're talking about based on your description."

Yuder remembered all the abilities used by the Warden's Awakener subordinates when fighting with Kiolle da Diarca. Among them, there was one who used fire and another who controlled wind. Coincidentally, they were currently lying unconscious outside after being hit by a stone.

'Well, that's fine. It's just surprising that Zakail Hartan turned out to be more sinister than I thought.'

Yuder had suspected that Zakail Hartan was up to something, but he hadn't expected the scope of the incident to be this vast.

Zakail Hartan. The youngest son of the elderly Lord Hartan. Despite being the lowest-ranked child, unable to inherit any titles or estates, his fate had 'coincidentally' changed when the Lord and his eldest daughter died.

After the death of his father and the heiress sister, his older brother, who was gaining power in the knights' order, was expected to receive a higher title, hence would pay little attention to the small estate. As a result, Zakail was likely to inherit the estate. All this happened very 'coincidentally.'

But could such coincidences be so common in the world? Yuder knew they couldn't and added another line to his prejudiced opinion.

'If the Apeto family, who wanted to expand their influence in the East, and Zakail, who was low in the succession line, joined hands and planned everything, it all makes sense.'

The elderly Lord suddenly decided to send Devran's sister away ahead of the crucial matter of inheritance because someone had informed him about a critical piece of information regarding his eldest son at that very moment. Who could have done it? Was it not the one who had to cause a big incident to prevent the inheritance?

Zakail claimed that his delayed response to the fire incident was due to an errand he was running for his father in the next village, a coincidence that happened on the day of the fire. Yuder knew that the most suspicious individuals were just like him.

When it came to fighting Kiolle, the Warden of the Apeto family was highly irritated at Zakail's request for help. In fact, that very statement was the biggest evidence that confirmed Yuder's suspicions.

'Listening to Devran's account makes everything much more certain.'

Their mistake, however, was their attempt to squeeze Devran Hartude, a Cavalry member, into that perfect evidence.

Zakail probably wanted to get rid of Devran, a commoner woman's son he intended to use as a scapegoat for his plan,

especially since Devran had suddenly obtained a leave and returned. The Apeto family wouldn't have wanted to miss the opportunity to capture a Cavalry member who could provide them with information about Kishiar.

The two of them had similar interests and drove Devran into a trap, staging his death.

They probably thought it would take a lot of time for the Cavalry to notice Devran's disappearance and send an investigation team.

However, Kishiar sent people much sooner than expected, and unfortunately for them, Yuder himself was included.

No, it was about to become their misfortune. Starting now.

Yuder listened to Devran's sobbing as he lay on the floor, nursing his cold anger. No matter what he had been through, Devran was still alive. His limbs were intact, and if he could escape from here, he would make an excellent witness to these series of events.

"Devran. What do you think they planned to do with you if they couldn't extract information from you?"

Yuder slowly asked his final question, contemplating his next move. Devran's eyes, swollen from the beating, darkened with hatred and fear.

"…They said they'd send me to the Apeto main house. There are more skilled torturers and mages there… They said I'd make a good test subject…"

As he continued speaking, Devran gritted his teeth.

"I remember them saying that."

"Test subject?"

“That’s what they kept telling me. They kept using the term ‘test subject’ and spoke in a language I couldn’t understand.”

Did that mean the Awakeners kidnapped by the Apeto family were being used for some sort of experiment?

‘…I’ve heard something similar before.’

Yuder searched through the memories of his past life. When the Awakeners first appeared, all sorts of mages and priests flocked around them, trying to understand the source of their power and any peculiarities.

Most conducted their research in public, but there were grim rumors of those who conducted their investigations in secret, employing methods that couldn’t be exposed to the world.

Of course, a lot had been discovered about the Awakeners as research progressed, and the population’s transformation increased day by day, gradually slowing down the trend of conducting research by any means necessary.

‘It didn’t just slow down… There were so many chaotic incidents back then that that could be part of the reason.’

Yuder shook his head to clear his thoughts. He had heard everything he needed to from Devran, and now it was time to move.

“Devran. Can you stand?”

“Heh, I can.”

Despite being tortured for several days, Devran’s tenacity had not died. Whether it was his large frame or thick bones, Devran managed to push himself up, leaning against the wall for support. Yuder was impressed by Devran’s grit as he bit down on his pain and groaned.

‘Such is the way of the Cavalry.’

“From this point onward, I will free the people trapped in other rooms. Once we figure out the reason they were detained, I will release them with you. You must escape this place. If you happen to find your family in the process, that would be excellent. If I find them first, I promise to unconditionally protect them and take them with us. So, you can rest assured. Your ability is… ah. You said something about having a bomb attached? Where is it?”

“On…on my back.”

Devran hastily lifted the hem of his shabby shirt. There, in an ingeniously unreachable position, was a small, black magic stone. The stone was in fact a cheap piece, embedded with a low-level spell. As long as the condition for detonation wasn’t met, it was not too difficult to remove.

Yuder immediately detached the magical stone and put it into his pocket. A relieved sigh escaped from Devran, his expression bewildered.

“You’ve… removed it?”

“Yes.”

“Just like that?”

“It’s nothing if you know how. Here, catch.”

Yuder tossed Devran a small dagger he had taken from the possessions of the men they had encountered outside the cave. Grasping it, Devran’s expression hardened with resolve.

“Can you use your ability?”

“It’s fine. All the guys we encounter on our way out… I won’t let them be.”

Even in his heavily wounded state, Devran, who had never lost spirit, had been tortured out of fear of a cheap magic stone bomb. In his previous life, even a newly joined recruit would not have been afraid of such a thing.

Yuder resolved to strongly recommend including methods to dismantle these cheap toys made by the mages when he got back to the Cavalry training program. If Kishiar were in charge, he would certainly accept.

“Let’s go.”

Emerging outside the cell, Yuder opened all the cell doors and signaled to Devran.

“I will dismantle all the chains. Let’s share the responsibility of bringing them out here.”

Thereafter, their operation proceeded swiftly and efficiently. Before long, except for the last prison where Kiolle was being held, all thirteen prisoners and two intruders who had been locked in eight prisons gathered in a small space in the middle of the cells.

Most of the confined people were like Devran, Awakeners from the East who had resisted being taken away to Apeto Duchy and thus had been imprisoned.

And, very fortunately for Devran, among those imprisoned were his own family.

“Father! Dermilla!”

“Brother!”

Devran’s younger sister had been gagged in such a way that she couldn’t speak. It soon became apparent that his father had been forced to swallow a pill that took away his voice, presumably because they thought he was too old to withstand such a gag.

But such a condition could be treated as long as they were alive. Devran hugged his family, tears streaming down his face.

His deeply worried family had been trapped in the very next room, suffering in silence, unable to even confirm each other’s wellbeing. Looking at them, Yuder exhaled deeply once more.

The fact that they had been so thoroughly imprisoned but not killed, was indeed a testament to how much Apeto Duchy valued the Cavalry member Devran.

Why, though? Was there a need to extract information related to the Cavalry to such an extent?

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Chapter 85

“Thank you… Thank you, Yuder. I will never forget this favor.”

“Thank you. Truly, thank you.”

Yuder bowed his head, watching the siblings repeatedly express their gratitude through tear-filled eyes. Until now, it had merely been a stroke of luck. If he had been even a bit later, Devran’s family would already have been dead, and Devran himself might have been dragged to the Apeto Duchy.

“No need for thanks just yet. Save it for when we’ve safely escaped this place and reunited with Gakane and Jimmy in the castle of Lord Hartan.”

“Gakane and Jimmy? They’re here too?”

“Yes. But they are within the castle, so contacting them will be difficult. Don’t go inside. Use your power to create a fire big enough to be seen from the castle. Gakane will recognize it and come to you.”

Of course, Gakane would assume that Yuder was the one who started the fire, but he would soon realize that was not the case. Yuder had faith that Gakane, with his level of judgment, could easily evacuate everyone safely.

After all, wasn’t he a seasoned veteran who had endured relentless training for a week without even a moment’s rest? It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that among the current Cavalry members, there was no one who could perform their duty as excellently as Gakane.

“Ah… understood.”

“We’ll help, too.”

As Devran nodded, other prisoners, who had been leaning on each other, raised their hands and boldly spoke up. Among them, the one who had been imprisoned the longest said he had been there for over three months.

Looking at their teary eyes filled with hope and gratitude, Yuder felt slightly strange. He wondered if it was because he had never saved or rescued people in his past life. Or was it something else?

“What abilities do you possess?”

To rid himself of that nagging sense of responsibility, Yuder quickly asked them. Most were physical enhancement users, and a few were elemental ability users like Devran. Yuder, lost in thought for a moment, slowly opened his mouth.

“Form a circle with the elemental users and ordinary people in the middle, and the rest surrounding them for protection. We’ve encountered several people on the way out of the cave, but none were Awakeners, so they should be easy to subdue. Once outside, do not return no matter what. Go straight to Hartan’s territory and join my group.”

He also told them to leave Hartan’s territory as soon as possible after the reunion. Zakail Hartan was there, so it wasn’t a place they could linger.

“So what will you do, Yuder?”

“I’m going to deal with that Warden and follow after.”

“Will you be alright? Alone, how will you…”

“I got here by myself and I’m fine.”

To be precise, he wasn’t completely alone, he had the uninvited guest Nahan with him, but he didn’t bother mentioning that. Devran gave him a look that seemed unsure whether to worry or to be annoyed, but quickly nodded his head in understanding.

“I see. You are strong, you’ll be fine. There’s always at least a mage where those bastards hang out, so be careful. The torturers are skilled swordsmen, not to be underestimated.”

The information that there might be more than one mage was useful, so he made sure to remember it.

“Before we go, wait a minute. You there, your name was Dermilla, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

After ending his conversation with Devran, Yuder signaled his younger sister to come closer, beckoning her with a low call.

Even while Devran was with the Cavalry, time in Hartan had kept on flowing. The odds were high that she, who had long kept a secret relationship with Zakail Hartan’s brother, would have more information.

“Zakail Hartan seems to be the provider of all events. Do you happen to know anything?”

“Lord Zakail?”

Dermilla was much more perceptive than expected and possessed a remarkably steadfast character. As soon as she heard his question, she opened her mouth as if she had guessed the situation they were in.

“Oh my. Does that mean Lord Zakail is targeting Hartan…?”

“Perhaps.”

“I see. Ah. Somehow… I always believed that Lord Zachlis never abandoned me. He always used to say that he was suffocated by the excessive ambition of his family. The Lord wanted to arrange Zachlis’s marriage with a noblewoman from another village to increase his family’s influence. And Lord Zakail, he always wanted to acquire without working for it…”

Acquire without effort - wasn’t that exactly the situation Zakail was in now? Instead of responding, Yuder merely smiled faintly.

“You seem to have a good eye for people.”

“Yes. Although he is a noble, he is a truly honest and admirable person.”

However, even he had been fooled by Zakail’s schemes, hadn’t he returned to the knight’s order? Judging by his promise to return, it seemed that he had not completely believed in the death of his lover, but it must have been difficult for him to understand his sibling, who was constantly plotting while confined within the territory, given his own busy schedule as part of the knight’s order.

“There’s a high probability that he believes your family is dead by now.”

Yuder added that the villagers believed Devran had killed his family, set their house on fire, burned down half the village, and then committed suicide in prison. They had to prevent the three family members from showing their faces to the villagers in case they spread the truth.

“It might be a little worrying, but once we’re completely out of here and into the safety of the capital, I’ll contact him.”

“Oh, by the way…”

Dermilla, who had obediently nodded, suddenly turned her gaze as if she remembered something.

“A few years ago, Lord Zachlis apologized to me with a regretful face. He told me that he accidentally revealed to his brother his plan to marry me and leave this place forever after establishing a new base in the knight’s order… But he also said that since neither of them could inherit the territory or the title, they could keep it a secret to that extent. I forgot about that after he said it, but maybe…”

Although that wasn’t essentially helpful information, it seemed sufficient as a motive.

The feelings of competition against two rivals and only one were no different. Perhaps Zakail Hartan had been dreaming of the impossible from that time.

“Also, there were many rumors that Lord Zakail was a worry to the Lord because he quit school in the middle and returned a year ago, continuously wandering around the nearby villages without any reason.”

“A year ago… After he returned, did he not show any strange behavior in relation to the Awakeners?”

“It was strange, really. Frankly… I thought the reason he fled to the capital was because that person treated him with such hostility. That person particularly despised those who awakened and gained power.”

“That’s enough for me. Dermilla, I hope you never return to the village. Also, I found this in your burnt house, I’ll give it back if you need it.”

Now that he had found the Devran family to be alive, the double brooch picked up from his house had served its purpose. As Yuder showed her the double brooch, Dermilla’s mouth gaped open.

“That, that’s…”

Yuder gently nodded, indicating that she should take it. Dermilla, her face filled with emotion, carefully accepted the brooch from Yuder’s hand. Yuder almost regretted giving it back too quickly, seeing Devran’s grave, uncomfortable expression as he watched his sister’s joy.

“Now, those who want to leave should go. Remember all the precautions I have told you.”

Yuder whispered a few tasks to Devran, to carry out when he met Gakane and Jimmy. Among them was a message to inform Kishiar of the current situation as soon as he could use the public communication device in the next village.

The imprisoned who were released began to make their way out of the cave as soon as they wrung out all the information they had learned while captive and relayed it to Yuder.

“Urgh!… Arrgh!”

“Grunt!”

‘Ah, right. I forgot to talk about the three who fainted on the way out.’

Just moments after Devran and the previously imprisoned had disappeared, Yuder was reminded of the small detail he had forgotten as he heard the muffled screams.

The Awakeners, having removed the bombs attached to their bodies and gained freedom, overflowed with willpower despite their weakened state.

Indeed, the stronger their will, the more powerful the abilities they manifested. Yuder hadn’t considered the possibility that they might

not escape regardless of their health condition.

‘Now all that’s left is Kiolle da Diarca and…’

Yuder turned his head toward Nahan, who had quietly observed his actions.

“The one hidden by illusion, let him out now.”

“You’ve found out.”

“That guy must be the companion you were looking for.”

Yuder had noticed that the number of people Nahan had brought from the prison and the actual number of people in sight were exactly one person off. Since then, Nahan had been overly quiet, as if hiding something.

“Yes, you’re right.”

At Yuder’s words, Nahan moved his fingers and the dark cave wall next to him peeled away to reveal a boy with a pale face.

Yuder was slightly surprised to see that the one Nahan had hidden was so young. The boy seemed about the same age as Jimmy. He was undoubtedly the youngest among those imprisoned.

“You had this young boy purchase all the food and goods for your bandits?”

“No need for suspicion. This little brother has a power that’s optimized for that kind of work.”

Nahan responded with a cold smile to Yuder’s gaze, which was as if looking at garbage.

“What kind of power?”

“The power to make friends.”

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Chapter 86

“The ability to make friends.”

Yuder couldn’t immediately understand what that power entailed. Despite having traveled back in time, it was the first time he’d heard of such a power. Upon making eye contact with Yuder, the boy quickly hid behind Nahan, as if frightened.

“Yes, since you’ve found your companion, your objective must be achieved.”

Yuder thought that Nahan would just take his young ally and disappear. If it had been him, he would have done the same. After all, if they missed this moment, they might not have another chance to escape unnoticed.

“True. However, this time, I think I’ll follow you to the end.”

Yet, Nahan said something unexpected.

“I don’t need a spectator.”

“I’m an accomplice who has come this far with you. It hurts a bit to be called a spectator.”

What was he thinking? Yuder grew suspicious of Nahan, more than ever before. However, there was no need to unnecessarily increase the number of enemies at this point. Thus, he decided to retreat, keeping a wary eye on Nahan.

“If it becomes a hindrance…”

“It definitely won’t. Just as it hasn’t until now.”

Nahan was eloquent, if nothing else. Ignoring him, Yuder headed towards the last remaining prison cell. As he unlocked the door, the man tied up inside with ordinary ropes glared at him, his eyes filled with rage.

“Ugh… uuuhh…”

Of course, it was Kiolle da Diarca, the one left behind until the very end.

He tried to yell something, but because of the gag, his words were incomprehensible. Yuder stared at him for a moment before finally speaking.

“Kiolle da Diarca.”

It was a name he’d tried to forget since their first encounter, yet it had eventually etched itself into his memory, which was impressive in its own way.

“I’ll remove your gag, but if you scream or make any unnecessary noise that might attract attention, I’ll knock you unconscious immediately. Nod if you understand.”

“Uuuuhhh!!”

Kiolle thrashed about as if telling Yuder to stop spouting nonsense, twisting his head with all his might. It didn’t seem like he understood Yuder’s words at all.

“Do we really need to save that guy?”

Nahan, who had been watching the whole scene, asked in an indifferent tone.

“He’s not a brother or sister who possesses the same power. He doesn’t seem extraordinary enough to merit rescue.”

“Uuuhh!! Uuh!”

Kiolle directed a furious glare at Nahan and yelled at him. Clearly, he didn’t appreciate Nahan’s words.

‘Honestly… I can’t argue with that.’

Would Kiolle even thank him for being rescued? It would be fortunate if he didn’t rush at him with fists clenched right away. However, Yuder still thought it was better to prevent his death.

Whatever it was, he’d decided to prevent a repeat of the past.

‘And if he dies here, they might pin Kiolle’s death on the Apeto household, drawing the Cavalry’s attention.’

He had to avoid any situation that could cause harm to the Cavalry at all costs. That’s why he had left Kiolle until last.

“If you continue to be uncooperative, there’s not much I can do. We don’t have much time.”

“Uh, uuhh! Uuh!!”

“Don’t like it? Should I just leave you here?”

“Urrgh!”

Kiolle glared at Yuder as if he wanted to tear him apart.

“Then I suggest you keep quiet.”

Yuder did not bother to get Kiolle upright; he simply slid the gag down to his chin, leaving him sprawled on the floor. The instant he did, a voice, brimming with rage, echoed out.

“You, you’re that guy from the Cavalry.”

Luckily, he didn’t yell, but the words themselves didn’t feel any less menacing. Kiolle coughed a few times, grinding his teeth and lifting his head, as Yuder watched him silently, offering no response.

“You have no idea how much I’ve been looking forward to seeing you again. You wouldn’t know how humiliating it has been for me, banished to this countryside because of you, being watched over by idiots.”

“Are you saying this is all because of me?”

“Yes! You’ve made a laughingstock out of me with your underhanded tactics, ruining my honor. Even my own father asked me to keep a low profile and train, casting me out. That was a first. No one would listen to me!”

“The Duke of Diarca seems to care more for this lad than I thought.”

Kiolle vented his frustration about his father, but Yuder interpreted a completely different meaning from his words.

Recalling the conversation the underlings had with the Warden of Apeto, Kiolle was likely the youngest child of the Duke of Diarca. In his previous life, Yuder had served an Emperor who was a foster son of the Diarca family, so he knew the Diarca family atmosphere a bit better than other dukedoms.

The Diarca family was the epitome of ‘nobility’. They were tied together only by the family name. There was little affection between family members and relatives.

In his previous life, Yuder had encountered the current Duke of Diarca a few times, but his impression was stronger of a cranky old raccoon rather than a human being.

The current Duke died of an illness not long after Yuder took his position, but the eldest son who succeeded him as the heir was not much different.

The Emperor kept the Diarca family slightly closer due to the bond he had with them when growing up, but he never fully trusted them. The family often described this distance as being noble and very Diarca-like.

Under the old Duke of such a Diarca family, the fact that such a free-spirited son came out, and despite causing multiple accidents, he was never properly disciplined but just sent off to train, was frankly quite surprising.

“So he’s the youngest son, maybe they just doted on him and let him be.”

However, Kiolle disappeared early even in the previous life. If he continued to live like this, even if Yuder saved him this time, his future didn’t seem like it would change easily.

“Are you listening to me? Undo these bonds immediately!”

Yuder exhaled deeply, facing the shouting Kiolle.

“You… you impudent brat, dare to sigh?”

“And what will you do once I free you?”

Kiolle shut his mouth for a moment at the calm question showing no fear of his yelling, then opened it again with a venomous glare.

“The obvious. I’m going to bring you to your knees.”

“And how, exactly? You’re unarmed at the moment.”

Yuder pointed out Kiolle’s empty waistband. Only then did Kiolle seem to remember his weapon being taken away, opening his mouth

and looking down at his waistband.

“…That, that is. I need to knock down Apeto’s dogs and retrieve it…”

“So, what will you do without any weapons?”

“You guys will do something, right? Didn’t I hear clearly that you were going to help the rest of the prisoners escape?”

“We don’t necessarily have to, you know?”

Yuder purposely lied.

“To be honest, I could just leave you here and escape myself.”

“What, what did you just say? How could you…!”

“So, what will you do next? Are you planning to defeat all of Apeto Duchy’s people unarmed by yourself?”

“Yes!”

Kiolle shouted as if in defiance.

“All I need is to beat someone and take their sword! So, let me go!”

“Is that all you have planned?”

At this point, Yuder stopped using honorifics.

“What?”

“I asked if that was the extent of your situational judgment, Kiolle Diarca.”

“You… How dare you, a commoner, question me, a high-ranking Imperial Knight…!”

“Who’s the one who passed out twice because they were weaker than a commoner, and behaved disgracefully due to inability to accept the difference in skill? Look at your state. Is your judgment that poor?”

Kiolle had probably never been spoken to in such a cold manner in his life. He was frozen, lips slightly parted, his face a mix of rage and surprise at the abusive words spouted by a commoner.

“Even with your foolish decisions, you haven’t shown any remorse even after losing a comrade’s life.”

“Comrade? Comrade, you say. Who!”

It was then that Kiolle finally started to move, thrashing about as he let out a scream. He managed to sit up, albeit with difficulty. His noble-like demeanor had long since faded from his dirty, earth-covered face as he looked up at Yuder.

“Are you talking about the dead Paviel right now?”

“Yes.”

“Did you overhear that from Apeto’s dogs on your way here? Ha. That traitor being my comrade is a ridiculous joke. He betrayed me and surrendered to the enemy so he could live. It’s natural that he died. How is that my fault?”

“If it’s not your fault, then whose is it?”

Yuder’s reply was calm, his gaze frosty.

“He was your comrade. He must have trusted you enough to get to that point. You had countless ways to make better decisions to

save your own life and your comrade's. But you didn't. Blinded by anger, you risked everyone's safety, pushing yourself into a life-threatening situation. And still, you say it's not your fault that he died because of you?"

"Shut up! What do you know! Should I have cared for the one who betrayed me out of fear of death and insulted me? Why should I!"

Kiolle Diarca seemed just like a stubborn child, too full of himself to see what was happening around him. He was not the sort of person who could stand above others and take responsibility. Yuder leaned slightly towards Kiolle, who was gnashing his teeth in anger.

"That's why you have three flowers on your armor. Do you need any other reason?"

Kiolle's expression mixed with anger and confusion as their gazes met.

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Chapter 87

“I came this far following the Commander’s order to find our missing team member. And I am on the verge of fulfilling that order. It’s my duty as the assistant to the Commander of the Cavalry. But what about you?”

“…”

“You couldn’t protect your subordinate, you put your own life in danger, and you can’t even judge the situation correctly, blinded by personal rage, charging at me without thinking again. Is that your role? You claim to be a noble, yet you can’t think beyond that? Is it more important to knock me down than considering what is more crucial at this point, or what to do next? What’s the use of your head?”

“What… what……?”

Kiolle’s eyes and lips were trembling.

“Whether a noble or a commoner, death is the end for both. Stab either, and the same red blood comes out. How significant do you think lineage is here?”

“You…”

Finally, as if Kiolle understood something, he swallowed his words and closed his mouth.

“So, you had no intention of saving me. So… that’s why you left me till the end to take revenge on me…”

‘What would I gain by taking revenge on you.’

However, his frightened look wasn't bad. Yuder didn't bother to correct his misunderstanding and opened his cold mouth, keeping his eyes straight.

"Convince me why I should save you. If you fail to do so, you'll die here, Kiolle."

"Me? Convince? You?"

Kiolle, with wide-open eyes, asked back with a dumbfounded face.

"Yes."

"So, you won't kill me? Really?"

"If you can convince me properly."

"Ha…… Haha."

Perhaps it was a joke. His eyes, implying such a meaning, stared at Yuder. But as time passed and he saw Yuder patiently waiting, his expression slowly distorted.

'He must have never had to contemplate whether to live or die until now.'

He must not be so stupid as to prefer dying rather than trying to persuade Yuder in this situation. At least, Yuder wanted to believe that.

Yuder keenly observed Kiolle's changing expressions, which were interestingly diverse. Doubt and confusion, a sliver of hope, and the stubborn pride named self-esteem struggling within, anger and pain, and… all of these gradually crumbling, leaving behind only one emotion.

“…If you let me out of here, then, yes. My father… will reward you.”

At last, the first words Kiolle managed to say were just as Yuder expected.

“Rejected.”

“Why?”

As soon as Yuder shook his head, Kiolle shouted in anger with a flushed face.

“Why? Because it’s unnecessary. Next.”

“Unnecessary? This is the Diarca Family! We’re talking about the reward of Diarca! Commoners like you die for money! What else do you need? Treasure? Would jewelry do? Or maybe a sword? Do you want a fine horse?”

“I don’t care whether it’s money, jewelry, or treasure. I don’t need any material things. Convince me with something else.”

“Damn it! Then… a position. I’ll give you a position. Would a regular knight position in the Imperial Knight do?”

“Rejected.”

Why would he care about the Imperial Knight, which would become an insignificant group a few years later? Yuder frowned and shook his head without a second thought. Over Kiolle’s face, anger and worry mixed and rippled.

“Ah, very well. I’ll speak to my father and request him to promote you to the position of Cavalry Commander. It won’t be immediate, but it should be satisfactory to you.”

Cavalry Commander? Yuder nearly laughed out loud. Besides it being the most absurd proposal Kiolle had made so far, it was preposterous that a mere one of the countless children of the Diarca ducal house, not even an heir, would so lightly suggest such a position.

‘It shows how much regard the Diarca House has for the Cavalry.’

Feeling fortunate that Kishiar was not present, Yuder responded coldly.

“How many times do I have to tell you that I’m not interested in anything related to status or power?”

“Damn you, then what else could you possibly want!”

“Do you always need to give something to persuade someone, is that it? Besides, you don’t have the power to give anything you’ve mentioned yourself. That’s not persuasion.”

For a moment, Kiolle’s expression was as if he had heard something he had never contemplated in his life.

“What I demanded was for you to provide a reason for your survival here. Not pointless wealth or status. Can’t you even offer that simple thing? Do you truly believe that you’re superior to the dead when you can’t?”

At least Kiolle’s dead subordinate knew when to kneel before his enemies in order to survive. Of course, it wasn’t a good method. It led to his death, after all. But at least he was better than the current Kiolle.

“…”

“The reason why everyone here has spared you is not because you’re great, but because they simply wanted to know about your

lineage. Apart from that, there's currently no reason for you to live. Why should I go to the trouble of saving you, who is destined to die anyway? Would you want to save someone who insults and annoys you?"

Yuder watched Kiolle, his face pale as if he had taken a blow to the head, struggling for breath with his mouth wide open. No one had ever spoken to him like this before. It was assumed he should be treated with special deference simply because he was a son of the Diarca family.

'But I'll make him admit that it's not taken for granted.'

After all, Kiolle had to be saved and sent away from here. Then, at least this much should be corrected to make his life worth saving. It was worth the effort for the sake of future matters.

"Ha, but, the other prisoners. They were just saved… why only me…."

Whether he was convinced within Yuder's cold gaze that his status or ability held no meaning in the current situation, Kiolle's voice faded. He was experiencing the feeling of being fundamentally denied for the first time in his life.

There had been countless people who had criticized and looked down on him, but they had never been able to ignore his noble status and the name Diarca.

His status and power were the strongest armor that had supported Kiolle de Diarca. But now, with that armor gone, Kiolle was swallowed up by an indescribable fear and emptiness.

"They were innocent imperial citizens who were imprisoned simply because they awakened some power. Of course they should be saved."

“So, are you saying that I’m worse than those commoners?”

“Worse.”

Yuder replied firmly.

“Even after being defeated twice, you still refuse to acknowledge your weakness and continue to pointlessly brandish your sword. How could you be the same as those who understand gratitude? Even a beast knows to lower its tail before a stronger foe. Unlike you.”

“You, dare, to compare me, to a beast…”

Stammering with shock, Kiolle’s face had turned as white as a sheet. From the look on his face, it seemed he was on the verge of fainting.

“Fine, fine. It doesn’t matter if you don’t want to save me. They can’t kill me anyway. If I just wait, my father will surely come to rescue me!”

“Really, will he?”

At the soft question, Kiolle’s face contorted.

“No one knows you’re missing right now. The knights who came with you for the training aren’t even looking for you, so how would your father know? There’s plenty of time for these guys here to kill you and bury your body.”

“What…”

“There will be no change even if you die, Kiolle. The death of a non-heir during a training accident wouldn’t be surprising. Even if the perpetrator is revealed, the noble families won’t feud over it. It’s just that simple.”

“You are, simply that insignificant.”

“Ah…”

At the cold declaration, Kiolle’s ragged breathing stopped completely. Even if he was foolish, he was a member of a noble family, and he would’ve realized that Yuder’s words were accurate. The words were true, so he couldn’t argue against them.

It seemed like he finally grasped the reality before his eyes, unable to express his anger. Yuder looked at Kiolle’s face, sensing that he had finally made a dent in his stubborn obstinacy.

“Well, if you want to die, I won’t stop you. Is our conversation over?”

“…”

“Alright. It seems there’s nothing more to say…”

“…Wait, wait.”

Kiolle urgently called Yuder.

“I, get it. You’re, you’re stronger than me. I admit… I’ll admit it. I’ll, I’ll apologize too.”

Yuder, who was about to turn away, stopped his movement. To hold onto him, Kiolle struggled with all his might, trying to lift his head.

“If calling you a commoner made you angry, I take it back. If you let me out of here… I promise I’ll never challenge you to a duel again. If you ask me to, I’ll do anything I can!”

His bound hands gripped Yuder’s robe tightly.

“So please, save me. I don’t want to die here…”

Finally, the answer he wanted had come out.

Yet, Yuder didn’t show his satisfaction on his face and instead slowly bent down to sit.

“You’ll do anything?”

“Yes, anything.”

“Even if I ask you to betray your family and the Imperial Knight?”

“…”

At that moment, Kiolle’s eyes froze over.

‘Well, well, he’s scared. Truly a child.’

Yuder looked down at him and shook his head.

“Of course, I don’t have that intention. You’re not competent enough for such a task.”

“You, you bastard… You’re making a fool of me…!”

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Chapter 88

Kiolle stared at Yuder with the face of someone that had barely survived falling straight into hell. Of course, his gaze soon diminished like a small flame extinguishing in front of a chill breeze before Yuder's direct stare.

"Admission, apology, and a declaration to do anything. All three are the best things you've said so far. Not a bad persuasion."

At Yuder's words, Kiolle managed to express a bit of hope. But Yuder soon replied with a cold look on his face.

"But why should I believe you?"

"What?"

"Anyone can say words. How can I trust the sincerity of your words? If you deny ever saying such things once we leave here, that would be the end of it."

"Damn it. Then what, what do you want me to do? Take a knight's oath here?"

"An oath is too weak."

"Then what do you want me to do?"

Kiolle had no clue what Yuder was asking of him. Watching Kiolle's puzzled face, Yuder's lips curled into a slight smile.

"Alright. I'll find a way to definitely trust your persuasion. Wait here a little."

"What? Wait a minute. You have to free me first!"

Kiolle, surprised, desperately grabbed at Yuder's hem, but to no avail. Yuder easily freed his hand, stood up from his place, and brushed off his hem.

"It'll only be a moment. You won't die in that time, so don't worry and keep your mouth shut."

"What? No. You said you'd help me! Wait! Hey! Where are you going!"

Despite his defeated situation, Kiolle was indeed Kiolle. Yuder, who was about to turn away, stopped and bent over towards him.

Despite calling out first, Kiolle sealed his lips when Yuder approached, his face slightly scared.

'Scared, indeed.'

Yuder grabbed the gag hanging around Kiolle's neck and lifted it back up.

"Gah-!!"

Kiolle widened his eyes, thrashing about, shaking his head. He had experienced all kinds of humiliations and thought he had found a way to survive, but felt like he was rolling back into hell again. His desperate demeanor was understandable.

'But one should know when to trust a person's word.'

"If you said you would do anything, then first learn to quietly wait."

"Grrgghh! Urgghh!"

"I'm going."

Yuder left the cell where Kiolle was trapped. Then he waited for Nahan and the young boy to come out, before closing and locking

the door again. The muffled sounds of Kiolle could be heard from inside, but no one paid any attention.

“He will never keep his promise.”

Nahan stated coldly, a blank expression on his face.

“I know.”

“But how are you going to make him keep it?”

“I told you, I’m going to find a way.”

Yuder replied lightly, striding forward. It wasn’t long before the sight of three incapacitated Awakeners revealed themselves. They had been knocked unconscious by only throwing stones without a single injury when they arrived, but their current condition was a total mess. It was clear who had done it.

‘Devran and the others seem to have been quite tormented.’

Yuder used the power of wind to lift them and distributed them into any open cell, then resumed his stride. His destination was the crossroads he had seen earlier.

He had headed towards the prison before, but this time, he had to go in the opposite direction. The final goal of the day should be there.

“Aha.”

Only then did Nahan, who had been following Yuder, nodded his head as if he had guessed something.

“Indeed. There must be a way.”

Not long after, the road gradually widened, and small voices began to echo from the inside. Judging by the calmness in the

voices, they seemed to have not yet noticed what was happening outside.

‘It means Devran and the prisoners have taken care of the ones they ran into.’

Yuder continued towards those who couldn’t even imagine the silently approaching shadow of misfortune.

—

“…They’re late.”

“Hmm?”

“What is it? Are you already awake, Jimmy?”

After returning to the castle as Yuder had instructed, Gakane, who had been looking out the window, sitting next to Jimmy who lay in bed, turned his head in surprise.

Feeling somewhat sorry that his murmured words, not intended for the ears of a sleeping boy, had elicited a response, he asked, “Did you wake up because of me?”

“No, I had a good sleep… I woke up quickly. But what do you mean it’s late?”

The boy’s cheeks, which had been slightly feverish before bed, were now back to their usual clear complexion.

Gakane didn’t notice the peculiar scent that those on the verge of a second gender manifestation exuded, but just to be sure, he lightly touched and then pulled his hand away from Jimmy’s forehead. There was no fever.

“Well… no. I just think Yuder is later than I expected.”

“Yuder?”

Jimmy, who had just woken up, sat up, rubbing his sleep-filled eyes. A steadily sinking sun was visible through the large window next to the bed. The crimson sunset was beautiful, but it was difficult to think so when he looked at the burnt black buildings beneath it.

Jimmy, turning his worried gaze towards Gakane who was looking out the window, said, “True… I thought he’d be back before sunset. But if something had happened to Yuder, he would’ve sent a signal as promised. Don’t worry too much, Gakane.”

Looking at Jimmy, who offered his consolation in a somewhat calm and dignified manner, Gakane managed a wry smile.

“That’s true. Anyway, it’s good you’re awake. I was actually about to go out and check around.”

“Outside… Ah. To check on that man Zakail?”

“Yeah. Earlier when you were sleeping, I went out on the pretext of getting water and got a feel for the situation. It seemed Zakail wasn’t in the castle.”

“He wasn’t? Where could he have gone?”

“I don’t know that. He might be back by now, so I want to go check again.”

“Wow. I want to come too.”

Jimmy’s eyes sparkled as he tried to get out of bed. Gakane put out his hand, pressing down on the boy’s round head to make him sit back down, shaking his head.

“You can’t.”

“Why!”

“People here think you’re lying down because your body isn’t in good shape after the long journey. The best way to scout around without arousing suspicion is for me to go out, pretending to fetch necessary items like water or towels while looking after you.”

Unable to find a rebuttal to Gakane’s reasonable response, Jimmy pouted his lips, looking disappointed.

“…Then hurry back. I’ll be here.”

“Right. But it’s also important to keep an eye on the outside, so you need to keep watch until I return. If by any chance you see Yuder send up flames or any other signal, run straight to me.”

“I understand.”

Gakane rose from his seat, looking at Jimmy, who promptly nodded with a determined expression. Jimmy was more calm and smart in judging the situation than his peers, so he could be relied on to handle things properly. Now Gakane had his own work to do.

Not long after Gakane stepped outside the room, maids appeared across the hallway, murmuring and chatting among themselves.

They had an air of discomfort around the unwelcome guests in the castle, but Gakane did not let their attitude affect him. He greeted them warmly and approached them first.

“Hello. Could I possibly get a towel?”

“A towel? Why do you ask?”

An older maid asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

“One of our little companions isn’t feeling well. He has a fever, and we need a wet towel.”

“The little one… are you talking about the little brown-haired child that was with you?”

“Yes. Poor thing, he seems to have overdone it moving such a great distance so quickly. There’s not much we can do; he’s still a child.”

While the Easterners seemed to dislike the Awakeners, they felt sympathetic toward Jimmy, who was still a child.

The maid, old enough to have children of Jimmy’s age, exchanged sympathetic glances. The previously tense atmosphere softened instantly. Everything was going according to Gakane’s plan.

“I’ll bring one, so wait here for a moment.”

“Thank you. You’re really kind.”

After all, how many could resist a handsome young man with a strikingly beautiful face speaking softly with a smile?

Gakane was well aware that his looks played in his favor when it came to people’s favor, and he utilized this to the fullest to lower the maids’ guard.

By the time the maid returned with the towel, he had naturally obtained most of the information he could get from them.

“Jimmy. I’m back. Any issues?”

“No. Did Zakail return?”

Jimmy, who was watching outside the window, swiftly turned around. Gakane nodded, placing the newly acquired towel on the table.

“Yes. He left and returned within an hour.”

“So, he just met someone from the village?”

“No, that’s not it. Zakail has been going out alone from the castle and returning from time to time since a year ago. But the people he met were suspicious. He’s often been seen meeting unfamiliar hunters that people have never seen around here. The former lord was quite worried about it.”

“Hunters, you say….”

“I don’t know their identities. But I got another interesting piece of information.”

“What’s that?”

“Devran’s younger sister had a deep relationship with Zakail’s elder brother. Not long ago, Zakail told the late lord about this. The lord got angry, confined Devran’s sister in the castle, and then Devran, who was on leave, seems to have come here.”

Jimmy couldn’t hide his surprised look as Gakane casually spilled out all the deep information he hadn’t been able to gather while roaming around the village.

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Chapter 89

“Wow. Did people really tell you all that? Folks we met outside didn’t even bother to say a word. How on earth did you manage it?”

“It’s different when a group of men in black uniforms come asking questions and when one person approaches in a non-threatening manner.”

Gakane chuckled as he plopped down on a chair near the bed.

“At any rate, you have a sense of what’s happening now, right?”

“I think the reason Devran disappeared must be due to Zakail.”

Hearing Jimmy’s deduction, Gakane’s eyes softened.

“That’s what I’m thinking too. When Yuder returns, let’s confront Zakail directly.”

“Sounds good.”

Gakane and Jimmy’s gazes met, holding mutual understanding as they both lapsed into silence. Jimmy couldn’t hide his admiration for Gakane as he let out a small sigh.

“Gakane, you said you’re an Alpha, right?”

“Alpha? Yeah, that’s right.”

“I’m envious.”

At the sudden expression of envy, Gakane blinked quickly, his face a picture of surprise.

“What of?”

“I heard from others in the Cavalry… they said that if you manifested a second gender, you suddenly grow much taller. Were you like that?”

“Height?”

Gakane repeated, perplexed. This was the most peculiar question he’d encountered since revealing his second gender as Alpha.

“Well, not really… My height didn’t change much from before I awakened. I’m not sure.”

“I heard that Ever, who joined the Cavalry not long ago, is still growing after her awakening. And the commander is really tall.”

“The Commander… yeah, that’s true.”

Gakane contemplated, recalling the figure of Commander Kishiar. While Gakane himself was tall enough to stand out among average men, Kishiar was physically remarkable.

Normally, extremely tall individuals tended to appear clumsy, but Kishiar’s physique was as perfect as if it were sculpted by a god, only evoking a sense of overwhelming awe.

Although Gakane still often found it difficult to fully realize the fact that he had manifested a second gender, the Commander had the power to make even such an unusual fact seem utterly natural.

It felt as if Kishiar’s second gender manifestation was an extraordinary blessing in itself.

Gakane remembered the immense and overpowering aura of Alpha he felt when he first saw Kishiar on the podium. He had met quite a few comrades who had manifested as Alphas afterward, but none were like Kishiar. He was that kind of being.

“The Commander is of imperial lineage, so he probably had that physique from the start. Most likely.”

“Really?”

“Jimmy, do you want your second gender to manifest?”

Gakane carefully addressed Jimmy, who then nodded with a gloomy face.

“Why? You’ll grow taller as time goes by.”

The boy, whose eyes were hesitant about whether he should speak up, faltered for a moment before opening his mouth.

“I think my parents are overly worried because I’m young. But I don’t want it to manifest just yet… I don’t want it to hinder our mission.”

“Your parents? Oh, you said they live nearby. Didn’t you visit them during the recent holiday?”

At Gakane’s question, Jimmy shook his head.

“I had been staying at the house of my father’s friend who lives in the capital. My parents had asked me to.”

“Why… Ah.”

Gakane, who had been about to ask why, recalled the words spoken to him by the bandit chief who had introduced himself as Nahan and faltered. As if Jimmy knew what Gakane was thinking, his gaze darkened.

“My parents told me that because the shop is very busy, even if I take a sudden vacation like this, I might not get to see them. I thought they were telling the truth… but thinking about it now, I guess they weren’t. When I sent them a letter, my mother told me

that the next time we meet, it would be when they came up to the capital for business. I guess they didn’t want me to come back to my hometown.”

In the South, where Gakane lived, the atmosphere wasn’t particularly hostile towards the Awakeners, so it wasn’t easy to find words of comfort for Jimmy.

Gakane hesitated, then decided to give him some honest advice while stroking the boy’s head.

“Just because you exhibit a second gender manifestation doesn’t mean you have to grow taller, and just because you get bigger doesn’t mean you become an adult. Your parents are wise people, they’ll surely be okay. So don’t worry, and if you’re truly concerned, talk to the Commander or Yuder. They’ll definitely help you. Ah, and of course, I will as well. How about we stop by your village on our way back?”

“That’s okay.”

“Don’t you want to see your parents? Didn’t you say it’s only a few hours from here? A slight change in schedule shouldn’t be too much trouble, so tell me honestly.”

“No, really, I’m totally fine.”

Jimmy, who quickly shook his head, looked up at Gakane with an awkward smile after a moment.

“Thank you for not saying that my worries are too childish, Gakane.”

“You can act more like a child if you want. It would’ve been nice if my siblings were even half as mature as you.”

As Gakane deliberately sighed deeply, Jimmy's eyes widened in surprise at his unexpected words.

"You have siblings?"

"Yeah, I have five of them."

"Wow! I'm an only child, so I've never known what it's like to have siblings."

"It's not as great as you think. It's incredibly noisy, and they fight all the time. There's never a moment of peace."

Gakane thought about his younger siblings who would be at home by now. He hadn't seen their familiar faces this vacation, but he was okay because he knew he would see them eventually.

"That sounds like the Cavalry's atmosphere."

At Jimmy's words, Gakane chuckled.

"Indeed, it's not so different from the Cavalry."

"I wonder what Yuder is like? Does Yuder have any siblings?"

"Yuder?"

"You know, right? You're the closest with Yuder."

The conversation had suddenly veered towards Yuder, but seeing Jimmy's sparkling eyes, Gakane soon acquiesced.

Throughout this mission, Jimmy had been completely enthralled by Yuder's strong appearance. It seemed natural to want to know more about Yuder, given his behaviour, which was much like a puppy following its master.

'Closest with Yuder… I'm grateful if that's how it seems.'

Gakane honestly wasn’t sure if they were as close as it seemed. In Gakane’s eyes, Yuder was a mysterious figure with deep eyes that made it hard to guess his age.

Yuder hardly ever spoke about himself, and he was extremely reticent, always appearing like a solitary figure amongst the crowd.

Despite this, it was strangely inevitable that he attracted other people’s attention, possessing an overwhelming strength. It was only natural that he first earned the admiration and envy of others.

Of course, it changed after it was known that he was a considerate person who didn’t hesitate to risk danger for the sake of the Cavalry. But still, Yuder was a mysterious person.

Despite being of humble origin, he had no hesitation in leading others, his power was so strong it was terrifying to even question the extent of his abilities. Could such power really come from a young man who was only 20 years old?

If Kishiar La Orr was someone who felt like a being above humans created by the gods from birth, then Yuder was different in another way. Yuder Aile was essentially a manifestation of the ‘strength’ that Gakane had long desired.

Because of this, Gakane was fascinated and held a strong interest in Yuder.

Although Yuder didn’t seem to show more interest in Gakane than he did in others, it seemed like he didn’t dislike him either, and that was fine. Gakane considered himself to be quite persistent.

“Yuder probably doesn’t have any siblings. That’s what I’ve heard.”

“I see. There is a similarity between Yuder and me.”

Jimmy, who was smiling happily, suddenly looked out of the window and then suddenly got up.

“Eh? Gakane, over there… People are coming out and pointing at something?”

“What?”

Gakane also immediately got up from his seat and headed towards the window. Just as Jimmy had said, the villagers of Hartan, who had been going about their business all day, were gathered around the castle pointing and looking at something.

Gakane realized that their gazes were not directed at the castle but something beyond it and felt an odd sensation.

‘Could it be?’

At that moment, someone pounded fiercely on the door of the room they were in.

“Is anyone in there?”

“What’s the matter?”

“A fire. A big fire has started in the back mountain! It’s similar to the one Devran caused!”

The one who was pounding the door was a young servant. Seeing his terrified face, Gakane rushed out of the room.

From the window of their room, they could look down on the village, but they couldn’t see the mountain on the opposite side of the castle. When they went out to the corridor and looked out the opposite window, there indeed was a massive pillar of fire shooting up from the mountain.

Seeing the maids and servants from the castle all gathered together trembling in fear, Gakane grabbed one of them and asked.

“When did that fire start?”

“J-, Just now.”

“Where is Lord Zakail now?”

“He’s gone out with the guards!”

The fact that Zakail had gone out with the guards meant that he too hadn’t anticipated this situation. Gakane said he understood and turned to look at Jimmy who had followed him.

“Jimmy. Let’s go.”

“Do you think that fire is a signal from Yuder?”

Jimmy asked in a voice so soft that only Gakane could hear.

“I’m not sure yet. But it’s clear that something has happened. Did you bring your practice sword?”

“Yes.”

Jimmy showed the small practice sword he had on his waist with a stern face.

“Good. Come here.”

Gakane lifted Jimmy with one hand and summoned his shadow clone. The servants who saw the black shadow rising from beneath his feet started screaming and running away.

“It’s a monster!”

“A monster, huh? That’s harsh.”

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Chapter 90

“A monster, huh? That’s harsh.”

Gakane grumbled lightly, maneuvering his shadow clone. The shadow clone, carrying the lightweight Gakane who held Jimmy, hurtled fearlessly towards the open window.

“Ah!”

Jimmy screamed at the sensation of falling, but what followed the thud wasn’t pain or shock. The shadow clone carrying them had landed on the ground as gently as a whisper.

“Gakane, next time give me a heads up before doing something like that!”

“Sorry. I forgot in the rush.”

Gakane had learned during his hellish training with Yuder that such feats were possible with his shadow clone. The shadow clone, being almost impervious to the shock of falling from great heights, proved to be a far better mode of descent from a tall castle than physically scaling it down.

“Let’s run.”

They raced breathlessly towards the hill behind the castle. The hill was quite large and deep, but it wasn’t difficult to locate the column of fire visible even from within the castle.

When they finally arrived at the source of the fire, the scene that Gakane and Jimmy encountered was of two groups standing off against each other.

One side consisted mostly of injured individuals in tattered clothes, while the other side was made up of well-armored guards led by a young nobleman, all armed and ready for battle.

The two groups, weapons drawn and poised for battle, suddenly halted upon spotting Gakane and Jimmy. The first to welcome them was a burly man from the injured group.

“You’re Jimmy, aren’t you? Of course! And the one with you must be Gakane!”

“De, Devran? What happened to your face!”

Jimmy exclaimed in shock at the sight of Devran, whose face was unrecognizable due to the numerous wounds. However, Devran just smiled broadly.

“A small price to pay for survival! I’m fine. In fact, I’m feeling great right now. Hahaha.”

“Devran! Where have you been all this time? And who are these people with you?”

At Gakane’s shout, Devran pointed at the guardsmen, their weapons aimed at him.

“That despicable noble tried to frame and sell me out. These friends next to me were captured for the same reason. They’re all Awakeners. And these here are my family.”

“Family?”

Just as Devran said, a man resembling him, an older man, and a young woman supporting him stood by his side. It was easy to guess from their faces alone that the three were family.

‘So the family Devran was said to have killed was alive all along. Then that means…’

As Gakane’s gaze shifted towards Zakail, who stood behind the guards, Zakail, his eyes burning with rage, shouted loudly.

“Do you believe that? It’s all lies!”

“But Lord Zakail….”

The guardsmen, who were holding their weapons aimed at Devran, his family, and the escaped Awakeners at Zakail’s command, had expressions of utter despair.

Even if they ostracized the Awakeners, these were people who had lived as neighbors in a small village for a long time. Contrary to Zakail’s words, they knew perfectly well that the people in front of them were the real Devran and his family.

“If Devran didn’t kill his family, then perhaps he didn’t start the fire either. Since he has returned, at the very least, we should hear what happened….”

One of the guards aiming his spear murmured in a low voice. His words might have seemed reasonable to anyone else, but not to Zakail. Enraged, Zakail unsheathed the sword he’d brought with him and pointed it at the guard’s neck, yelling furiously.

“Trying to sympathize with a murderer, you’re no doubt a criminal too!”

“No, that’s not it!”

The guard, his throat at the tip of Zakail’s sword, turned pale and bowed his head.

“I have nothing to say to the bastard who killed my father and sister! Arrest those scoundrels now!”

“Uh… understood.”

However, the guards couldn’t muster the courage to step forward. They were paralyzed with fear, staring at Devran who was stirring up a storm, and the Awakeners standing next to him, showcasing their powers as if to make a point. The tension between the two sides intensified.

And Gakane, who had assessed the situation up until then, acted swiftly and concisely.

“Devran. Need some help?”

Standing between the two groups, Gakane spoke softly to Devran, drawing everyone’s attention.

“It seems like you guys don’t really want to fight, and we just need to deal with this young master. Isn’t that right?”

“That’s true, but what do you plan on doing?”

Devran asked with a puzzled look.

“Just this.”

“What are those guys talking about…! Ack!”

Zakail, who had been watching Gakane and Devran’s conversation with a stupefied look, suddenly screamed. Gakane’s shadow clone, which had quietly extended to right behind Zakail during their confrontation, abruptly rose, gripping Zakail by the collar and lifting him off the ground.

“Ugh! What is this monster! Let me go! I said let me go!”

“Master Zakail!”

The guards, who had only been on alert against Devran and the Awakeners, spun around in a panic. But no one dared approach the flailing Zakail who was now suspended in mid-air.

Seizing this opportunity, Jimmy, moving towards Gakane’s shadow clone, unsheathed his sword. His energy, appearing like a blue blade, was aimed at Zakail’s face, causing the screams of terror to grow louder.

“Th-that sword energy! From such a kid!”

“That child, don’t tell me he’s the nearby Awakener…!”

“Now, Young Master. Tell your guards to step back and let’s have a chat, shall we?”

While holding the terrified Zakail in the shadow clone’s grip, Gakane flashed a gentle smile. That smile, to the eyes of the guards and Zakail, looked devilish.

“If you refuse, you’ll get to see Jimmy’s sword skills. Aren’t you curious about how far he can go with that? Just a graze can slice off a limb, they say.”

“Ah, ah…!”

All those present, who were just ordinary people who had never even seen a Swordmaster or a knight who could handle aura in their lifetime, were completely shaken. The sword energy Jimmy displayed before these guards was akin to a calamity. Zakail, who had secretly scorned these people dispatched from the Cavalry, felt the same.

Staring at the quivering sword energy close to his face, Zakail gritted his teeth and managed to open his trembling lips to speak.

“E-everyone, step back.”

“But, Young Master!”

“Step back if I tell you to step back! Or do you want to die in my stead!”

Responding to the harsh call, the guards began to reluctantly step back. Only when they had retreated far enough that they could barely hear the conversation taking place did Gakane gesture to Jimmy to sheathe his sword.

Then, at last, Devran extinguished the enormous pillar of fire that still raged. Unlike the traces of fire that had blackened the entire village, there was no sign left where Devran’s fire had been extinguished.

“So, the remnants of the fire in the village weren’t your doing. Right?”

“Of course not.”

Devran, who had briskly answered Gakane’s question, glared at Zakail as he moved closer to Gakane.

“What on earth happened? Escaping all the way here and suddenly starting a fire, what was that all about?”

“I just did as Yuder ordered. He saved us all. He said to go out and start a fire so you guys would get the signal and call you out.”

“Yuder?”

Gakane, whose eyes widened slightly, then examined the faces of those behind Devran. But he could not find the familiar face.

“But why can’t I see Yuder?”

“That guy said he had things to do and let us go first. I think he plans to come after he takes out all those damned bastards over there.”

Gakane was about to ask who those damned bastards Devran spat out with a face full of hatred were, but he refrained. It was a fact that would be known when Yuder returned.

“So, the guy who was with Yuder stayed too?”

“There was one stranger I’ve never seen before.”

“Okay. Is Yuder’s message just to join us?”

“No. He said to immediately inform the Commander about what happened here, and to return the way we came from Hartan.”

“…Escape?”

To go back the way they came. When and where was Yuder planning to join them? Gakane was slightly worried, but he decided to trust Yuder’s abilities and judgement.

With Yuder not here, he would have to move everyone including Devran. There was no time to waste.

“Alright. If the Commander’s assistant said so, we should follow his command. All of you, we will need to move quite a bit, are you all okay?”

At Gakane’s question, the Awakeners behind all shouted out in unison that they were fine. Although they were all injured like Devran, their faces were incredibly bright. Since Yuder had saved them, their faith in the Cavalry seemed to pierce the sky.

However, only Zakail, who was tightly grasping Gakane’s shadow clone, couldn’t rejoice. He quickly realized that a very bad situation

was occurring as he listened to the ongoing conversation.

Devran, who had been sent to Apeto's Family due to their interest, had safely escaped, and the one who saved them was apparently going to finish things up there.

It sounded absurd, but with the prisoners alive right before his eyes, there was no choice but to believe.

"Damn Apeto bastards. After acting so confidently, what on earth did you do!"

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Devran, who should have been dead to atone for all his sins, couldn't be allowed to live. The same was true for the people of the Apeto family who had joined hands with him and orchestrated all these events. If it were revealed that Zakail had joined hands with them to seize the Lordship, he could never be forgiven.

Even though he hadn't yet inherited the Lordship, with the success of everything right before his eyes, he didn't anticipate such a turn of events. Although his mind was reeling, only the thought of escaping by any means necessary propelled Zakail to act unabashedly.

"How dare you plot in front of me, the Lord of Hartan? Escape? Report? This is absurd. I will contact His Grace, the Duke of Peletta, your immediate master, right away. I will ask him to grant me permission to execute the person who killed my father and sister and is now roaming around with a calm face…!"

"Did I kill the Lord and the others?"

The one who responded to Zakail's words was Devran. He couldn't help but let out a genuine laugh, as if the suggestion was absurd. However, the laughter that burst from his face, covered in bruises and wounds, looked monstrous, causing Zakail to involuntarily recoil in fear.

"So… so, didn't you! By starting a great fire!"

"Why would I?"

Devran asked back with a twisted smile. His eyes were full of hatred, but his voice was eerily calm, making Zakail shiver even more.

“What?”

“Why would I do that, huh? No matter how much I think about it, there’s no reason, right? I left my hometown, joined the Cavalry, received a holy order from the emperor himself, and made a lot of money. I was on the path to success. Why would I risk all that? Doesn’t that seem absurd to you, too?”

“How should I know? People like you get a little power and start getting ideas above their station, and perhaps in your arrogance, you started the fire! Because of you, I didn’t even hear my father’s and sister’s last words!”

“So, you’re blaming me with lies until the very end.”

“So, are you saying that I, who wasn’t in Hartan at that time, started the fire?”

“Ha, that’s a good point. Let’s discuss that, shall we?”

Looking into Devran’s piercing eyes, Zakail managed to keep his unease at bay.

‘What’s this? Does he have some kind of proof? No. These guys don’t know anything yet. I left no solid evidence that I was in league with the Apeto family. Even if they heard something when they were caught, words alone can’t serve as evidence.’

As Zakail rolled his eyes, Devran opened his mouth.

“The guys who captured me grumbled that taking over a small place like Hartan wouldn’t mean much and that they’d done too much for what they got. They even said that without me as a payoff, the deal wouldn’t have been worthwhile. That means someone joined hands with them, took Hartan, and handed me over as compensation. Who else could be the culprit if not you, Zakail Hartan, considering the Lord and the heir, Zupiel, have passed?”

“…”

“Or could it be Zachlis, who has already received his knighthood and started a new life? None of them had any reason to do so. But you, Zakail Hartan, you had a reason! Can you swear before God that you didn’t commit all these atrocities just to become the Lord of Hartan?”

Devran’s resonant voice was so loud that even the guards standing far away could easily hear their conversation. Zakail gritted his teeth as he heard the murmuring voices from afar.

“After the fire, you didn’t listen to a word I said. You immediately framed me as the culprit, locked me in prison, then buried me alive in front of the Rock of Death, didn’t you?” Devran accused.

“No!”

Zakail yelled, his body convulsing as if in a seizure. But no matter how much he struggled, the black shadow clone that firmly held him didn’t so much as flinch.

“I heard that you had committed suicide in prison, so I simply ordered you to be buried quietly!”

“Whom did you tell this to?”

The one who retorted to Zakail was a handsome man with auburn hair and striking features. The man in a well-fitted black uniform looked down at Zakail with eyes sparkling with amusement as he asked again.

“To whom did you give this order, Zakail? If we can find this person, the truth will be revealed. Right, Devran?”

“Right. I couldn’t know who took me that day as I was hooded, unable to see.”

‘You, you brats.’

Zakail suddenly realized that he had fallen into a trap. Of course, he never gave such an order. The ones who had taken Devran from the prison, buried him, and then dug him up again, were the people from the Apeto family who had disguised themselves as hunters and hidden after negotiating everything in advance with Zakail.

Zakail had personally opened the door leading to the prison so that they could fulfill their purpose quietly under the cover of the pre-dawn darkness without anyone noticing.

To divert the attention of his older brother Zachlis, who came rushing upon hearing the news of their father and sister’s death, and the village people, he spent all day preparing for the funeral in the back hill, purposely dragging out the time.

As he expected, no one cared about the missing Devran. They all believed that Devran had killed his family and set fire to the castle.

Who could suspect that Zakail, who was faithfully playing the naive youngest son who knew nothing, was lying? Zachlis, busy with knightly duties, was shell-shocked upon hearing the news of his lover’s death and was spaced out throughout the funeral.

Although he had said that he would deal with inheritance matters when he returned to the Knights Order, Zakail didn’t doubt that his brother would not desire to inherit the title of lord of the village.

Aside from the fact that the promising future of a knight was brighter than the petty lordship of a small village, he calculated that his overly sentimental brother wouldn’t want to return to the village where his lover died.

If that happened, Zakail would have become the lord as planned, gaining the protection of Apeto instead of the Diarca family, who hadn’t done anything for him, and would have grown stronger. He

had big dreams of starting as the insignificant youngest son of a small village lord and ultimately becoming the winner in the east.

Zakail bit his lower lip hard enough to bleed as he thought about that dream. He couldn't afford to be tripped up here because of those commoners.

'Let's not interfere. Getting angry won't benefit me. Bowing my head to those commoners is humiliating, but I need to reassure them and survive.'

"I really can't remember who I gave such an order to, as there wasn't enough context."

"You're only saying that now…!"

"Father and older brother are gone. Do you think there would be any danger if it were you? Yes, perhaps. Who knows if those men who claimed to have captured you had deceived me and taken you instead. Right?"

"What?"

Zakail managed to force a smile to match Devran's brazenness.

"Listen, I'm not sure who planted this ludicrous idea in your head, but it wasn't me who captured you. Think about it. I'm a victim too. All I did was order a proper burial upon hearing news of your death, and here we are. Shouldn't vengeance be first sought from those who captured you? Right?"

"…"

"Free me now. If you do, I will forgive all the insolence you have shown me and, as the current representative of the lord of Hartan, I will happily assist you. I'll contact the capital to help find the real

culprit. Persisting in hounding me in this manner won't do you any good."

Devran, and everyone else present, were taken aback by Zakail, who was trying to persuade people with sheer audacity despite having no evidence. His audacity was truly formidable.

'He probably won't admit anything without evidence. I suppose I should just do what I need to do before he can further manipulate the situation.'

"Devran. We need to send a letter, let's return to the castle for now."

"Can't we just kill him?"

Despite facing his mortal enemy, Devran, who was unable to lift a finger, muttered with a scowl. At Devran's grumbling, Zakail visibly shrank back, holding his breath.

"Did Yuder say it was okay?"

"No."

"Then don't."

After saying this, Gakane approached Devran and whispered just loudly enough for him to hear.

"When Yuder finishes his work and comes back, that guy's done for. You don't need to soil your hands. Our leader will take care of it. So, bear with it for a little longer. For the sake of your family."

"…All right."

At the mention of his family, Devran, whose face had softened, subdued his fiery temper and exhaled. They took Zakail, who they had apprehended, and returned to Hartan Castle.

The villagers, seeing Zakail caught by the shadow clone and lifted up, wore expressions as though they were about to faint, but were even more surprised when they saw Devran and his family who had returned alive.

“What on earth happened? I thought he was dead?”

“Considering Lord Zakail has been captured, it seems…”

“Goodness, what in the world is happening!”

And their confusion peaked when they entered the castle and came face-to-face with a terrified-looking elderly attendant.

“Lo, Lord Zakail! Not long ago, Lord Za, Za, Zachlis had returned and was waiting… but… what on earth…”

“Zachlis is here?”

On behalf of Zakail, who was gagged by the shadow clone, Devran shouted out loud.

“That’s good. Where is he now?”

“In, in, in the parlor…”

“Let’s go.”

They all rushed to the parlor. The same parlor where, this morning, Yuder and his colleagues had devoured a plethora of food, much to Zakail’s annoyance, now had a man dressed in silver armor anxiously pacing.

The man, who had a similar appearance to Zakail but seemed much kinder, was startled by the sudden influx of people. However, upon noticing Devran and Dermilla behind him, his eyes widened in shock.

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Chapter 92

“My goodness! Dermilla!”

“Zachlis!”

As though no one else existed, the man who arrived breathlessly embraced Devran’s sister, weeping loudly. Even Devran, who was about to shout at him, couldn’t stop their momentum.

“Dermilla! Dermilla! Is it really you?”

“Yes, it’s me.”

“I can’t believe it, by the gods. After hearing that you were dead, I, I couldn’t… Oh, thank the gods!”

After a long bout of sobbing in each other’s arms, Zachlis Hartan finally calmed down enough to engage in conversation.

“I, I’m sorry everyone. The shock of this… miracle… So, what exactly has happened? Who are you all?”

“Do you not remember me, Sir Zachlis?”

At Devran’s sarcastic query, Zachlis quickly shook his head.

“No, not you. I remember you, Devran. What in the world happened? Why is Zakail in this state?”

Devran, who was still holding his sister’s hand and whose eyes were red from crying, gave Zachlis an indescribable look. Gakane thought it would be better if he took over.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Sir Zachlis Hartan.”

“Yes, I am Zachlis Hartan.”

“I am Gakane Bolunwald, a Cavalry under Duke Peletta, assigned to investigate Devran Hartude’s disappearance. If I may ask, I heard you were to return a few days later due to some business with your order. It appears you’ve returned earlier than expected?”

“Well, that’s…actually, I received a letter during a funeral yesterday about an urgent matter, but I ran into a colleague in a village this morning who told me there was no such issue. He suggested that there might have been a mistake in delivering the command. So, I immediately returned to the village.”

At those words, both Gakane and Devran’s gazes simultaneously turned towards Zakail. Zakail had been avoiding their gazes and showing a hardened face since seeing his brother.

“Oh, what to do. You wanted to chase Sir Zachlis away for a long time and kill us all in the meantime, but it didn’t go as planned, did it?”

“…”

“What do you mean?”

Zachlis frowned, glancing back and forth between Devran and his brother.

“What did Zakail do? Is it related to the news that Devran killed his family and committed suicide?”

Zachlis was not as clueless as expected for a knight. Gakane glanced at Devran and slowly began to speak.

“Please listen carefully to what I am about to tell you.”

Although there didn’t seem to be much affection among the family members, it would still be a shock to Zachlis, being Zakail’s brother.

Ignoring Zakail who was struggling against the shadow spirit restraining him, Gakane calmly began to explain.

“We believe that Zakail is involved in all of these incidents. The reasons are…”

As Gakane narrated, Devran, his younger sister, and the Awakeners each contributed, filling in the gaps in the story.

At first, Zachlis wore an expression of disbelief, utterly shocked. But as the story came to an end, he looked at everyone with a cool and collected gaze.

“…and so we have joined forces and returned here. That is all.”

“I see. Understood.”

A long sigh slipped through Zachlis’ lips. He slowly took in the sight of his lover’s tear-stained face, the wounded Devran, and Gakane and Jimmy in their black uniforms. His gaze finally settled on Zakail, who looked worn out, as if he had given up on everything, and stared back with a dreadful glare.

“Could we release Zakail for a moment? It seems we need to hear his side of the story.”

“More of this…!”

Gakane raised his hand to quiet the increasingly agitated Devran and nodded in understanding.

“Alright. But, understand this—we won’t entirely free him because he might try to escape. We will only release his mouth.”

“That’s fine.”

To Gakane’s eyes, Zachlis already seemed to believe their story was true. As the shadow clone that was covering Zakail’s mouth slowly lowered its hand, Zachlis moved closer to him.

“Brother, you don’t actually believe their words, do you?”

“Zakail.”

Zakail looked at his elder brother who had just called his name and forced a pale smile onto his face. But the smile was oddly twisted, as if he was struggling to control his facial muscles, making him look even more strange.

“It’s all lies. You know I can’t do anything. How could I betray Father and Sister? They’re targeting me and making up stories!”

“….”

“If I were to join hands, who would I do it with? This is absurd. As you know, I’m not interested in the lord’s position. I’ll give it all to you. Then it’ll be fine, right? You trust me, don’t you?”

“Zakail.”

Zachlis called his brother’s name again. For the first time, Zakail realized his elder brother, whose eyes he always thought were filled with pointless dreams and annoyance, could look so cold.

“Enough with the lies.”

A chill ran down Zakail’s spine.

“Don’t tell me you thought your strange behavior over the past year had gone unnoticed by our family.”

“…What?”

“You’ve always had the most greed among us brothers, but never put in the effort. Even when Father worked hard to pave a path for you to become a scholar, you threw away the opportunity and started mingling with suspicious figures a year ago. How should we have interpreted that?”

Zakail was so surprised he unintentionally opened his mouth.

“…Wha, what are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the fact that Father hastened the inheritance of the lordship to our sister because of you. If we had left you to your devices, you would certainly have dragged other powers into our territory, putting us all in danger.”

Zachlis sighed and looked down at his younger brother.

“But it seems it was too late. I had no idea you would involve my lover to satisfy your greed. Quite impressive, really. You precisely knew what kind of action would make me lose my senses and you acted on it.”

“No, brother. That’s not it. Listen to me! Are you really going to cast out your own brother based on these baseless stories and being blinded by a commoner lover?”

“Zakail. Her name is Dermilla. No… Now, having taken on Devran’s last name, she is Dermilla Hartude.”

“What does that matter now!”

“It’s far more important than my brother who tried to kill my lover and sent me a fake letter to drive me away.”

Zachlis pulled out a letter from his chest.

“If this letter wasn’t truly sent from the Knights, we need to find the culprit, don’t we? It seems quite interesting if we bring those guys who claimed to have captured and tortured Devran.”

“…I didn’t send it.”

“Do you think they will say the same? If you had no interest in the lordship, you must first explain why as soon as I returned to this castle, many servants spoke exactly the opposite of you. They were convinced that you, Zakail, would inherit the lordship.”

Only then did Zakail’s face contort violently.

“…That’s… just the stupid commoners babbling!”

“Oh? Then I suppose it’s fine if I take the lordship.”

“What? But, you are in the Knights…”

“If I can be by Dermilla’s side, I don’t care where I am. It might be better to inherit the lordship, marry her, and send you away.”

“Ha…haha. That’s a lie, right…?”

Zakail managed a weak smile as he studied his brother’s face. But there was no sign of jest in Zachlis’s cold gaze.

‘No, it’s not true. He’s lying to shake me up. My brother, how could he leave the Knights and accept a small town’s lordship. That can’t be. It’s not true.’

But if Zachlis truly said he would become the lord of Hartan, there was no power anywhere that could overturn that. Zakail knew this too well, and despite his self-comforting words, he couldn’t dispel his anxiety.

The long-standing tradition from the east was stronger than law. Even the people of Apeto couldn’t overturn it. Who could dare

oppose an eldest son, even one year older, inheriting his father's estate?

Zakail saw his wide dreams, which he thought were spread out before him, collapse in an instant. All his plans started from becoming the lord of Hartan. What if he couldn't secure the lordship of Hartan?

Would anyone give a new opportunity to him, who would simply be the incompetent youngest son of a noble family?

"No, it's not true. It's not true!"

Zakail shook his head and writhed.

"It's not what you really meant, right? Right? Brother, you said you're fine as long as you have her. She came back alive, so why are you doing this to me! Don't I deserve any pity…! Uh…!"

Gakane had stopped Zakail's mouth around that point, so his yell was quickly stifled into a groan. Zachlis, who was watching his brother reveal his greedy gaze and struggle in desperation, sighed and turned his back.

"Thank you."

"Do you wish to not speak further?"

"Well, as you can see, there's nothing more to hear. The circumstances of everything are so clear."

There was no trace of sympathy for his brother in Zachlis's eyes. He brushed back his hair with a slightly tired face.

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Chapter 93

“I have a rough idea of whom my brother might have sided with. The Apeto Duchy has been trying to expand its power in the east these days.”

Upon hearing this, Gakane glanced slightly towards Devran. He could see Devran nodding, signifying his agreement with Zachlis’s assessment.

“I also heard that name when I was captured.”

“I see. Apeto…”

…Could those that Yuder is currently facing also be of this family?… Gakane didn’t know much about the Apeto Duchy, but he decided to include the name in the letter he would send to Kishiar.

“I am truly sorry for failing to resolve the troubles within our household in a timely manner, causing many people to commit irreversible sins. Especially you, Devran, I have nothing to say.”

When Zachlis made an apologetic knightly salute, not just Devran, but all the commoner Awakeners were taken aback. They hadn’t expected him to go so far.

“Well… Zachlis, you didn’t sell me out.”

“Still, your father and Dermilla could have died. Had I been here, such a thing wouldn’t have happened….”

Seeing him apologize so formally left Devran no room to act coldly towards him. Devran sighed heavily, glanced at his younger sister standing behind him, and lowered his head.

“Hasn’t Lord Zachlis also lost family members? It’s alright. My family and I are all still alive.”

From what Gakane could see, Zachlis seemed more upset about the injuries inflicted upon his lover and her family than the death of his own.

It wasn’t surprising that familial love wasn’t deep in most noble families, but it was clear that his feelings towards Dermilla were sincere.

“Lord Zachlis, may we borrow a messenger bird for a moment? I believe we need to write a report to our Commander immediately.”

“Of course. I need to contact the knight’s order as well. I suspect I’ll be here for a while.”

Zachlis declared that he would keep Zakail locked in his room until this matter was settled. At his command, servants entered the reception room with anxious expressions and escorted Zakail, who had been freed from the shadow clone, out of the room.

Zakail was led away, looking half dazed, as if he believed that his brother might actually accept the position of Lord of Hartan.

“Devran, let’s go up and write a letter to the Commander. Jimmy, take good care of everyone here, make sure nothing happens.”

“Will do.”

Jimmy’s face was full of resolve as he gripped the hilt of the sword on his waist. If it had been earlier, his stance would have been seen as cute, a spectacle for laughter, but no one laughed after seeing the sword aura Jimmy exuded.

Following Zachlis’s guidance, Gakane borrowed a messenger bird that only those working at the Hartan lord’s castle could use. He

tried to write the letter as briefly as possible, combining what Devran said and what he had found out, but there was so much to cover that it took longer than expected.

“It’s a bit of a waste. It would’ve been nice if Kanna was here.”

“Huh? Kanna? Ah, the deputy commander of Jung Division?”

When Gakane murmured, stopping his letter-writing for a moment as a thought occurred to him, Devran looked at him with a puzzled expression.

“Ah, the ability to read the information contained in objects would have been a big help if I had it here. If Kanna had seen Lord Zachlis’s letter, we would have immediately known who wrote it, and we would have known sooner where you were taken. It was a bit tricky to get information since the people of this village wouldn’t speak.”

At first, he thought it was just a small incident, but he didn’t expect it to grow so unexpectedly. Who would have thought that the disappearance of Devran before coming here would involve a surprising group like the Apeto Duchy?

‘This might become bigger than I thought.’

But, having accomplished the original objective of finding Devran and keeping him safe, their task here was done. If things escalated further, Gakane knew it was to be left to the Commander, Kishiar.

‘I wonder if Yuder will be okay on his own against the people of the Apeto Duchy… especially when he’s alone with the bandit leader. Even knowing he’s strong, I’m suddenly worried.’

Gakane watched the flying messenger bird carrying the letter until it completely disappeared from sight, and then turned.

“Let’s go, Devran.”

“Are we leaving immediately as planned?”

“We have to.”

“Hmm…”

Gakane tilted his head at the lukewarm low hum from Devran.

“What’s the matter? Is there something bothering you?”

“Well… the reason we wanted to escape here was because we thought Zakail would be alone. But now that Lord Zachlis is here and the situation has changed… there’s no need to immediately leave with the injured, is there?”

Devran suggested that it might be more comfortable for them to join Yuder here. Gakane couldn’t help but consider this for a moment.

“I’m fine with these injuries, but there are others who need proper care…”

‘He’s got a point.’

If they left, Zachlis would have to monitor Zakail alone, and if anything happened to Yuder, they wouldn’t be able to rush to his aid immediately. Gakane pondered for a moment before responding.

“Alright, we’ll stay here just for tonight, have a proper meal, and…”

“Gakane, Devran!”

Just then, the door burst open with the sound of hurried footsteps from outside. An excited Jimmy rushed in and gestured at Gakane and Devran.

“Come out quickly. There’s another huge fire in the mountains!”

“What?”

“It’s a fire that broke out much further than before. I think Yuder might be…”

Before Jimmy could finish, Gakane rushed outside. The place they visited to send the messenger bird was located right under the highest roof of Hartan Castle, so as soon as they went out, the outside scenery was clearly visible.

And just as Jimmy said, in the distant mountains, an enormous pillar of fire was shooting up, as if it was trying to pierce the sky.

“With that size… everyone in this area must have seen it.”

Devran, who had followed Gakane, murmured in astonishment at the sight of the fire.

“Devran, could you make a fire that big?”

“No. The biggest fire I can make is about the size of the one from earlier. That… to be honest, it’s beyond imagination. Even if we gathered all the Awakeners with fire control ability from the Cavalry…”

It was Yuder. Yuder must have caused it. Gakane’s intuition flared sharply.

“Yuder. What on earth is happening there…?”

—

When Yuder Aile stepped into the spacious chamber at the very back of the cave, the scene inside wasn’t much different from what he had expected. The familiar Warden and a few of his cronies were seated in a circle, chatting idly.

“We should probably drain some energy out of that noble brat before questioning him at dawn. You handle it, No.3. And has there been any communication from headquarters yet?”

“Unless there are unforeseen issues, we should hear something by today…”

“Huh? Who’s there?”

The man who had noticed Yuder and Nahan’s entrance opened his mouth in surprise. Yuder raised his hand and gave a light swing before they could fully comprehend the situation.

“Argh!”

The cave was instantly thrown into disarray by a sudden whirlwind. All the people and items inside were swept into the air, frantically fluttering about. In the midst of this chaos, screams echoed throughout the cavern.

“Save me!”

“What’s happening!”

Yuder watched those who were made a mess of, colliding with flying furniture within the whirlwind, for a while. Suddenly, he felt a tingling pain rising from one hand and lowered his head.

‘What’s this?’

But the situation was not relaxed enough to inspect it right away, so he quickly diverted his attention. When he thought he had sufficiently stirred things up, he quieted the wind. Amidst the shattered furniture and the jumbled mess of people, they dropped to the ground, groaning.

“Ahh… Ahh…!”

“My, my arm…!”

“Nahan. Gather them all together. I’ll tie them up.”

“Quick and simple. I suppose there might not be another in the world who could subdue this many people so easily, save for you brother.”

Despite being told numerous times not to refer to him as brother, Nahan never seemed to get the hint and endlessly repeated the same thing. But there were more pressing matters than correcting him at the moment, so Yuder just scowled slightly and focused on the task at hand.

Once he had tied up all the fallen men and gathered them in one place, he counted seven in total. Among them, the Awakeners who had fought against Kiolle under the Warden’s order were knocked unconscious by a blow to the back of the neck, and separately quarantined.

The Warden and his subordinates, who had watched the entire process unfold flawlessly, were petrified with fear, unable to fathom the identities of Yuder and Nahan.

“You… who the hell are you? Who sent you…!”

“That’s not important.”

Yuder walked towards the Warden, whose face was swollen from getting hit by the broken furniture.

“I’m short on time, so let’s make this brief. Do you work for the Apeto Ducal Family?”

“…Kill us!”

Ignoring Yuder’s question, the Warden shouted with his toothless mouth.

“Whoever you are, we will never talk. Just kill us!”

‘So quick to ask for death.’

The sight of these men, who had not only captured innocent Awakeners to use as tools of power struggle but also attached low-quality bombs to their backs, puffing up their chests and squawking bravely after a minor beating, was absurdly amusing.

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Yuder watched them in silence.

If they truly thought death was better, they would never talk like they did. Those who took on dangerous missions, ready to face death if captured, typically carried poison within them or signed an oath that would explode and kill them instantly if they were caught.

‘Those who neither carry poison nor sign oaths sure talk big,’ Yuder thought.

Yuder had his own way of dealing with such individuals. For those without the courage to kill themselves, the best approach was to induce fear by stimulating their imagination.

As he moved to draw his sword without a word, Nahan, who had been observing Yuder’s actions so far, grabbed his shoulder.

“Wait. Would you let me handle this?”

“And what will you do?”

“You’re trying to make them docile, aren’t you? That’s my specialty. Besides, I have my own score to settle with them.”

Nahan’s gaze briefly landed on the boy who was hiding behind his back and then on those who were bound. Hearing Nahan’s emphasis on the word ‘imagination,’ Yuder remembered what Nahan’s power was.

‘Using illusion powers for interrogation?’

Suddenly, Yuder became interested. He nodded and stepped back.

“Fine.”

“I promise I’ll be faster.”

As Nahan stepped forward in place of Yuder, the Warden’s scarred face contorted with fear and disgust.

“You… What the hell are you?”

“I am an ally and an avenger for my brother.”

“Brother? Are you talking about that mute kid?”

The Warden’s eyes darted nervously towards the boy hiding behind Nahan.

‘Mute?’

Yuder had thought the boy was simply scared because he hadn’t said a word so far, but could he actually be unable to speak? As Yuder turned his head, the boy flinched and averted his gaze.

‘Hmm, I didn’t mean to scare him….’

Just as Yuder was about to say something to the boy, a sudden outburst came from behind him.

“Ah, I see. I understand now. You lot came to rescue those locked-up bastards! Yes, I’ve heard there are madmen like you these days…ugh!…

Before he could finish his words, he suddenly screamed and fell to the side, as if he had been hit by something. The faces of those bound with him simultaneously contorted.

“Warden…?”

“Wait, wait! Don’t come! What is this, what’s happening! No! Ah, no, no!”

The Warden twisted and turned, screaming at the empty air, looking every which way. It seemed like he could not hear nor see anyone speaking to him.

‘What’s going on? There’s nothing there.’

As Yuder stared at the void, he turned his gaze to Nahan who was observing the Warden in extreme terror, shrieking. Nahan was looking down at the Warden like an insignificant bug, a faint smile playing on his lips. From the small ripple of energy emanating from Nahan’s fingertips, it was clear that he was using his power.

The screams didn’t stop for a while. Gradually, any semblance of human emotion faded from the Warden’s face.

In the end, he wet himself on the spot without even being able to utter a proper plea or moan. He was shaking, muttering into the empty air as though he were mad, the stench of urine around him. His appearance was indeed that of a madman.

“Please, please, please stop. Stop. I…I’ve made a mistake. Uh…ugh…aaaah!”

Everyone present, observing the grotesque scene of his twitching arms and legs and contorted face, was gripped by absolute terror. Even those who had previously faced Yuder and Nahan with some semblance of composure while being held captive could no longer meet their gaze, panting heavily with fear.

The most potent fear often comes not from personal experience, but rather from witnessing it up close and imagining that you might be next. From Yuder’s perspective, Nahan seemed to understand this quite well and wielded it masterfully.

‘I wonder what they were doing before this. I guess the curiosity naturally falls to the other side.’

Yuder studied Nahan’s cruelly smiling eyes. What kind of illusion was this man presenting to the Warden? Although he didn’t really want to know, the fact that he started to use his ability just when the Warden was about to say something irked Yuder.

‘But there’s something else bothering me more right now…’

Yuder covertly glanced at his own hand. Between the slightly exposed sleeves of his crossed arms, he could see his wrist turning a violet shade. Dark spots had started to creep up his hand, covering his skin above the black glove.

‘I didn’t think too much about using my power, but I didn’t expect it to become like this.’

Until now, the appearance of spots had never been accompanied by pain, but now a needle-like tingling sensation intermittently throbbed from slightly above his elbow to his hand. Opening and closing his fist did not alleviate the pain.

‘It’s unfortunate I can’t remove my clothes now to check how far it has spread… but if the pain corresponds to the area of the spots, it’s probably just above my elbow now.’

Elbow. Yuder remembered that Kishiar had said that was the approximate limit for effective treatment. Despite the red gem Kishiar had given him to prevent the spots from spreading quickly and which he had properly kept in his pocket, this had happened.

‘When the spots spread near the elbow, I started to feel mild pain. I wonder what happens if it spreads more.’

While curious, he wasn’t too keen to find out. Yuder took a deep breath after clenching and unclenching his fist again.

‘I should minimize my power usage from now on.’

While Yuder was examining his arm, Nahan was ruthlessly casting his illusion on others. The sight of people scattered around, bashing their own heads on the ground or breaking their own fingers while crying and groaning, was nothing short of hellish.

“That’s enough now. I only need to hear answers to the questions, so let one of them regain consciousness.”

“It’s not enough yet.”

Nahan murmured, standing in front of a man who was tearing at his own hair while crying.

“You volunteered to help. If you want to play, get out. I’m busy.”

“Cold-hearted, aren’t you? Alright.”

Nahan gestured slightly towards a man who was collapsed at his feet, pleading for mercy and banging his head on the ground. Yuder belatedly realized this man was the Warden.

Although only a brief moment had passed, he looked as if he had aged decades. His skin, soaked with sweat and fatigue, had wrinkled, his eyes were bulging as if he was going mad, and his hair had half turned white, which all made him look even older.

“Now, answer this man’s question.”

“Mercy…mercy…”

‘This is serious.’

Yuder had endured countless tortures in his past life and had himself taken many lives. However, this was the first time he had witnessed something that could so swiftly and decisively drive a person to madness.

Until now, he had thought of illusionary powers as less threatening, but for the first time, he began to sense a caution that they might be otherwise.

The Warden's state was indeed pitiful to an extreme.

"Apeto family's Warden. Can you hear me?"

As Yuder asked in a even more rigid and cold voice, the trembling Warden's eyes regained some focus.

"Ah… Apeto."

"Yes, you're the warden of the Apeto family, correct? Answer me."

"Ye, ye, yes."

The Warden quickly nodded his head.

"Your name. What is your name?"

"Ah, ah, Alban. Alban."

"Good, Alban. What were you doing here?"

The Warden, who had been previously defiant, threatening to kill or never speak, had all but lost his bravado. He seemed so grateful for Yuder's questioning that, like a child, he sobbed and spilled everything.

'As I thought, it wasn't much different from the conjectures I had made after listening to Devran.'

They were originally dispatched from the east to expand the power of the Apeto family. But, starting from two years ago, they also started kidnapping Awakeners, who were being ostracized in the surrounding areas, along with the mercenary Awakeners sent from the main house.

After torturing the captured ones to a certain extent to kill their spirits, they made them write an oath to work for the Apeto family and sent them to the main house, their job was done then.

“The main house. What happens to the Awakeners sent there?”

“Th, they… I’m not sure… but I’ve… heard… they are researched.”

“Researched?”

“Th, the priests. They stay and conduct research. There are many people in the main house who are connected to the temple… The Apeto family has traditionally sent many children to the Sun God temple… So, the temple… we contact once a week… and visit… once a month… even now…”

While letting the warden’s words, including the parts he hadn’t asked about, flow in one ear, Yuder focused on the words ‘priests’ and ‘research’.

“Did you hear what kind of research they are trying to conduct?”

“Th, th, th, that…”

The Warden scrunched up his face in pain and gasped for breath.

“I, I can’t… but…”

“Speak.”

Nahan, who was standing next to him, commanded coldly. Upon that, the Warden, who had stiffened for a moment, opened his trembling mouth with tears streaming down his face. His eyes rolled around like a madman’s.

“Aaah. They’re trying to… make them give birth… to a child… Research…!”

“A child?”

“A special, special child… Aaah!”

At that moment, the Warden let out a scream of pain. It wasn’t because of the illusion that Nahan showed him. He gushed blood from his eyes, nose, and ears, and died in an instant.

Silence swept over the body that had suddenly collapsed.

‘I thought he hadn’t written a vow of secrecy, but it seems he had.’ Yuder looked down at the body with cold eyes.

‘Research to make them give birth to a special child. What on earth does that mean?’

“…Wake the next person. We need to ask again.”

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Nahan immediately woke the next person according to Yuder's demand. However, the others could not answer the same question at all.

The only thing Yuder could find out was the fact that the family had given more rewards than usual when they caught an Awakener with a certain condition, and there was a box containing a small amount of correspondence they had exchanged with the family.

"They gave rewards when you caught a certain Awakener? Say it again."

Yuder asked the same question again to the last person Nahan had woken. The man, who had gone mad after seeing the illusion shown by Nahan, replied, laughing with his mouth wide open.

"Whether it's Alpha or Omega, that. Hehe, hehehe. Especially when we handed over those who were in heat… So they told us to leave them alone until they were in heat and then send them, the Warden did. Hehehe. Kehehehe."

His babbling seemed insane, but the information that could be understood from his answer was clear.

The priests who were said to be conducting research while staying in the Apeto family were looking for awakened individuals who had manifested their second gender.

'Child. And the second gender….'

For some reason, he had a bad feeling about it. Yuder grabbed the collar of the man who was laughing madly and then shedding tears.

“Hey. There should be some remaining contracts here too, right? Find them.”

After finding the remaining stack of contracts, Yuder rose from his seat holding them.

“Make sure these bastards don’t mess around until I return.”

“Are you going to that guy in the prison?”

Nahan asked in a soft voice.

“All I have to do is make him write the contract.”

“It doesn’t seem like a great idea, contracts are not absolute. That guy will someday repay today’s mercy with enmity. Wouldn’t it be easier just to kill him?”

“That’s not your concern.”

At Yuder’s words, Nahan chuckled lowly. His smile still bore the cold and brutal traces, giving Yuder chills.

“Yes. It’s none of my business.”

As Yuder turned his body, Nahan’s low voice echoed as if grabbing him from behind.

“But it was just advice from a brother.”

—

“Eh, uh, ooh!”

Kiolle squirmed in fright when he saw Yuder’s face spattered with fresh blood. Yuder couldn’t be bothered to explain that it wasn’t his blood, but the blood spurted from the dead Warden, so he thrust the contract he was holding in front of Kiolle’s eyes.

“Quiet down and put your finger or something on here.”

“Uh…?”

Kiolle stopped struggling and looked at the contract. There were a few sentences written in thin flame by Yuder while he was coming.

[One. Kiolle Da Diarca shall not tell anyone about the event that happened today.

Two. Kiolle Da Diarca cannot give unilateral commands, challenge to duels, or insult Yuder Aile or any other person.

Three. Kiolle Da Diarca shall help Yuder Aile within his capabilities.

Both parties will leave a contract mark on these matters.

If Kiolle Da Diarca violates any of the above, the contract mark will signal and notify, and the violator will fall into eternal sleep immediately.]

“What… what is this?”

As soon as Yuder untied the ropes and the gag, Kiolle screamed.

“Eternal sleep? What does that mean? Does it mean you’ll kill me or not?”

“If you don’t want to sign, then I’ll leave immediately…”

“Damn it! I’ll do it!”

Kiolle, his hand marked by rope burns, held up his hand, closed his eyes tight, and pressed his finger down. The moment he did so, a black smoke burst from the contract and in an instant, it had crept into the wrists of the two, leaving a mark behind.

“For your information, even if you leave here and try to kill me, it’ll be useless. Because of the third clause, if you try to indirectly kill me, it would breach the contract.”

“…”

Perhaps he had thought of it before, for Kiolle’s eyes slightly trembled.

“So, what happens if you just happen to die in an accident?”

“If I die due to reasons unrelated to you, the contract will lose its power. The mark of the contract on your wrist will disappear.”

“That won’t affect me, will it?”

“Right. So, get up now. Surely you aren’t pretending you need someone to help you stand.”

At those words, Kiolle gritted his teeth and, with some difficulty, managed to push off the ground and stand up.

“So where are we headed now? Have you seen my sword? Where did you leave your companions? Don’t tell me you killed all the dogs of the Apeto family? Or…”

Who on earth would believe that this noisy fool was a senior knight of the Imperial Knights? As Yuder, who had been leading, turned his head to say something, he suddenly felt a chill run down his spine.

Reactively gripping his sword and turning around, Yuder found himself halted at the sight of Nahan, a boy standing behind him, and the mercenary Awakeners with vacant expressions.

“Ah. You’ve already finished? That was quick.”

“Where are the ones I told you to guard?”

“That’s the thing. There was an unfortunate accident.”

Nahan, his face spattered with blood like Yuder’s, grinned quietly.

“I was just trying to keep them quiet for a bit, but they didn’t seem to like that and ended up dying.”

“What?”

“Really sorry about that.”

From Nahan’s calm expression, there was no sign of remorse typically associated with someone who had just caused an ‘unfortunate accident’. Nahan, who had come close to Yuder, held out a box that had been hanging on his waist.

“Here. I brought this, so take it.”

It was a box containing the letters through which the people of Apeto house there had communicated with their main house. Amid a stifling tension, Yuder slowly reached out and took it. At that moment, Kiolle, who had locked eyes with Nahan, froze like a herbivore in front of a predator.

“Let’s free the brothers trapped in the prison now.”

Nahan, with his smooth demeanor, approached the prison and re-emerged, leading the three mercenary Awakeners whom Yuder had imprisoned. He was unsure what ability Nahan had used, but they all had vacant expressions and were unusually docile.

‘I can’t see a trace of rationality in them. If he has such abilities, why didn’t he use them before…’

Why did Nahan choose to act now, after waiting so long? Were the members of the Apeto family, whom he claimed died in an unfortunate accident, really just victims of an accident?

‘Of course not.’

Yuder’s caution heightened a notch further than before. Sensing his guarded eyes, Nahan turned around and gave a faint smile.

Facing his strange smile - one side horribly scarred, the other beautifully sculpted - Kiolle unwittingly took a step back, halting suddenly. Nahan, seemingly amused by his reaction, turned his head and opened his mouth towards Yuder.

“Aren’t you leaving?”

“You go ahead.”

There was no good to be found in exposing his back in such a situation. At Yuder’s words, Nahan shrugged his shoulders and turned.

“As you wish, brother.”

The way out was eerily quiet. Yuder didn’t know what had become of Devran and the Awakened escapees they had encountered along the way, but at least no one was springing out of nowhere.

Even Kiolle, perhaps paralyzed by fear, had begun to quietly follow behind. The only sounds echoing through the darkness that half-shrouded them were the rhythmic footsteps as they trod the cave floor.

‘…Footsteps.’

Suddenly, Yuder halted and looked to his side. Kiolle’s flashy, high-quality boots brushed past him.

Catching sight of Kiolle’s face, eerily illuminated by the light streaming from the magic stones embedded in the wall, Yuder

immediately grabbed Kiolle’s arm and started running forward.

‘…Damn. Just as I thought.’

Despite Yuder’s sudden grab and run, Kiolle showed no reaction. His expression was vacant, just like the mercenary Awakeners who had emerged from the prison and stood behind Nahan. There was no doubt that he had fallen prey to Nahan’s illusion ability.

‘He wasn’t one to keep his mouth shut just because he was a bit scared.’

When had it started? Was it from the moment Kiolle tried to step back when they crossed paths at the prison? Recalling as he ran, Yuder gradually slowed and stopped.

“You had me wondering where you were going, brother.”

Despite running a good distance backward, they found themselves once again before the vacant-faced mercenary Awakeners, the young boy, and Nahan. Nahan looked at Yuder with a composed expression and opened his mouth.

“I’m not sure why you’re so guarded, but I don’t think there’s a need for that now that everything’s over.”

“Wouldn’t you be guarded in this situation?”

Yuder asked coldly, looking around.

“Have you killed all of Apeto’s people? Who are you going to kill next? Who the hell are you?”

“You already know who I am.”

“I find it hard to believe at this point.”

What certainty can there be against an illusionist who could suddenly twist the path ahead? To what extent was the Nahan that Yuder saw the real one?

Was he truly just a somewhat cruel bandit leader who gathered wandering Awakeners? Reading the whirl of suspicion in Yuder's eyes, Nahan chuckled.

"You're quite suspicious."

…Well, that's not so bad, either," Nahan muttered and turned his gaze to Kiolle's arm, held by Yuder.

"I mean no harm to your brother. Just let go of his arm. That's all."

'…Was Kiolle the target?'

In response, Yuder gripped Kiolle's arm even tighter.

"Kiolle Da Diarca."

"…"

No response came to the whispered name. Kiolle, with a vacant look like a puppet, merely swayed weakly as Yuder shook him.

"Kiolle!"

Even a slap that echoed loudly against his cheek did nothing. With a sigh at Kiolle's uselessness, Yuder looked back at Nahan.

"Don't tell me he stays like this forever unless you release him."

"Of course not. My ability isn't that powerful."

But Nahan's eyes said he had no intention of revealing the condition. If it had been usual, Yuder would have used his power to get rid of Nahan right there and then, but now his throbbing hand

was a distraction and he couldn’t immediately do so. Yuder held his silence for a moment, then opened his mouth.

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Chapter 96

“Why do we have to kill this one too? Why?”

“Why are you so keen on protecting him? He’s a worthless human being.”

In Nahan’s cold grey eyes, a ruthless gleam arose.

“There’s no value in us fighting over that idiotic man. Haven’t I been a decent ally up until now? Trust me. Let go of his arm and come here.”

“…”

Yuder looked down at Kiolle’s arm.

‘Well, his point is hard to deny.’

Kiolle Diarca may indeed be a person not worth saving here. Perhaps he might regret this moment.

‘However.’

Yuder took a deep breath and gripped Kiolle’s arm even tighter.

“No.”

Nahan’s fleeting smile vanished the moment Yuder’s resounding response echoed throughout the dark cave.

“What kind of ally kills all the witnesses on a whim, without any reason? I find you, who kills people as casually as a brainless nobleman, more distasteful.”

Indeed. From the beginning, Nahan was a suspicious man. He was more elusive than Kiolle, who was transparent in every aspect—origin and character alike. It was disconcerting to Yuder that Nahan, unlike Kiolle, gave no hint of what he hid behind his back, no matter how amiable he seemed.

‘Don’t trust anything you can’t clearly understand.’ This was one of the advices left by Kishiar before he handed over his position in Yuder’s previous life.

Yuder always recalled that advice when on a mission. It was the most practical and helpful advice of all.

“Stubbornness toward worthless targets only leads to unfavorable outcomes.”

“And who are you to decide that? By what standards?”

At Yuder’s question, Nahan fell silent. His left eye, marred by a red scar, stared blankly into space. Lost in thought, he slowly opened his mouth.

“The standard is simple. The presence or absence of power.”

‘Presence or absence of power?’ Yuder repeated the unusual words in his mind, trying to memorize them.

“I will do anything for my brothers and sisters who share the same power and will. And I will take lives as payment from those who have insulted and trampled upon us. There are no negotiations.”

With an emotionless voice, Nahan finished his sentence and turned his gaze back to Yuder.

“You’re a smart brother. You must understand what I’m trying to say. Now let go of his hand…”

“…You’re not just a simple bandit leader, are you?”

Yuder’s sudden remark halted Nahan’s speech.

“Where are you from? What’s your purpose?”

Nahan had claimed that he and his bandits would leave the empire once they had gathered enough money. However, thinking back, the bandits were also Awakeners, who had left their original homes, and the dazed-faced mercenaries standing behind him were also Awakeners.

Considering the boy he had come all the way here to save was also an Awakener, it seemed that Nahan’s purpose in gathering the Awakeners was not for personal or pure reasons.

‘Was there an individual or group trying to gather Awakeners who had lost their way during this time? There wasn’t in my previous life.’

“Are you targeting the Cavalry? Or is rebellion your goal?”

“Neither,” Nahan replied.

Yuder, who had been intensely pondering and about to speak, was shortly interrupted by Nahan, who furrowed his brows.

“Really, such a suspicious brother. Why does it matter whether I belong somewhere or not? All I want is to clean up this mess and leave.”

At the same time as he moved his finger subtly, Kiolle, with a dumbfounded expression, started shaking his arm forcefully to shake off Yuder’s hand. The force was strong enough that it could have slipped in an instant.

“Let go.”

“I said I don’t want to, ah.”

In the moment Yuder was about to respond, Kiolle had stopped struggling and tried to kick him. Yuder dodged it and, clicking his tongue, struck Kiolle's nape hard.

It was a strength enough to knock out a common person or even a trained knight, but surprisingly, Kiolle did not fall. He just opened his mouth dumbly and tried to escape Yuder.

"I can't understand. Why are you going to such lengths?"

"I told you. I don't like your side, more than this guy. So, and…"

Yuder, while trying to suppress the increasingly violently resisting Kiolle, raised his voice.

"Don't order me around because you're upset. There's only one person who can command me!"

The moment his words ended, Yuder buried Kiolle in the ground, leaving only his head exposed. Kiolle, buried deep below the collapsed ground, twitched as he let out a low moan, but he couldn't break free from the hardened soil.

At the same time, Yuder's arm throbbed heavily.

'I tried not to use my power… I had no choice.'

Yuder, while glaring at Nahan, the culprit who forced him to use his power, drew his sword from his waist. As flames began to crawl up the blade in a spiral, Nahan was seen frowning.

"Planning to attack?"

"You started it."

Nahan frowned. His expression seemed strangely like he wanted to laugh, but also didn't.

“Well, fine. Then I’ll do my best to get rid of this trash.”

“Using powers against brothers was strictly prohibited, but there was no choice with a skilled person like you.” As soon as those words ended, Nahan’s face started to ripple.

As soon as he saw it, his head and body became rapidly heavy. Yuder instinctively realized he was trying to use an illusion power against him.

‘He’s trying to incapacitate me and achieve his objective in the meantime…!’

Yuder quickly used his power to protect Kiolle, who was buried in the ground. However, in that moment, the scenery before his eyes abruptly changed with a swift sound of wind.

‘Yudrain.’

It was a very strange sensation. Yuder was certainly aware that he was kneeling inside a cave holding onto Kiolle, but at the same time he saw a beautiful golden-haired man speaking to him. It was Kishiar in his white uniform.

Obviously, Kishiar was the illusion. He was someone who couldn’t appear here now. Plus, he was calling him Yudrain, not Yuder. A name that no longer had a reason to be called.

His cool reason made the obvious judgment, but even knowing that, Yuder stiffened for a moment.

‘This trick.’

‘Yudrain.’

Kishiar called Yuder again. The enchantingly captivating low voice echoed in his ears.

He had to ignore it. He needed to avert his gaze from those crimson eyes. Even though he knew he needed to move somehow, his hand wouldn't obey, as though caught by something…

"Was it a good experience? The one where you plunged your knife into my heart."

Kishiar lowered the hand he had been holding near his chest. A gaping hole, where blood gushed ceaselessly, was visible between the black gloves he wore. Yuder knew the nature of that wound very well.

It was a wound that he himself had inflicted.

Before he knew it, Yuder realized he was panting heavily.

"It's all an illusion."

He knew it. He knew it, yet why couldn't he tear his gaze away from Kishiar? His heart was pounding so hard that he could feel it reverberating through his fingertips.

The strength slowly ebbed from the hand that held Kiolle. Behind Kishiar's illusion, Yuder saw Nahan, looking down at him with gray eyes shining.

Nahan was quietly smiling as he watched Yuder's distorted expression. Seeing that, a semblance of reason flickered in Yuder's warped mind.

"Perhaps, this is an illusion to stimulate the subject's fear and to drain their spirit. That guy, he doesn't know Kishiar. So this is purely… an element drawn from my own memory…"

"Yudrain."

The chain of thoughts that had barely been forming shattered instantly at Kishiar's call. The illusion of Kishiar approached and knelt on one knee in front of Yuder. Yuder was overwhelmed by a powerful urge to release his grip on Kiolle and retreat.

"Answer me."

An incorporeal bloodied hand came closer and touched his cheek. Despite being an illusion, the sensation was so vivid that it sent shivers down his spine. Yuder gritted his teeth at the sensation of the blood from Kishiar's body soaking his cheek.

"Answer me, Yudrain."

He almost responded reflexively. But he mustn't answer. He could sense it instinctively. If he responded to those words, then, he would be succumbing to the intense pressure weighing on his head and shoulders.

"To break free from a mental. From a mental ability attack. The general way is…"

He desperately tried to hold on to his numbing sense of reason and remember. This was his first encounter with such a potent illusion ability, but he had met enough psychic ability users. Usually, to counter such abilities that target the mind…

"Attack the caster, or else."

The sound of his gasping breath pounded in his ears like a drum. Yuder glared into Kishiar's red eyes and raised the sword he had been holding in one hand. Following this, a small sound, as if something made of flesh and blood had been brutally sliced, echoed within the cave.

"…"

A moment later, Yuder, gasping for breath, opened his eyes. Intense pain radiated from the arm that he had deliberately cut deeply. But his mind was clear, and Kishiar was no longer in sight.

Instead, the sight that came into his sharpened view was of Nahan, who had approached unnoticed and was swinging a blood-soaked dagger at Kiolle.

“This bastard.”

Without wasting a moment, Yuder swung his own sword to block Nahan. With a sharp clang, the two swords collided forcefully. While parrying Nahan’s sword, Yuder used the wind to fling him ruthlessly against the cave wall and picked up Kiolle from the ground.

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Chapter 97

“Ugh… What… what is this….”

At the same time Nahan’s body violently collided with the wall, Kiolle managed to somewhat pull herself out of the illusion and regain consciousness. Groaning softly, she shook his head.

“Why does my arm hurt so… No, why… why am I covered in dirt…? What is this!”

“That’s not the problem. If you’ve regained your senses, run quickly!”

The boy, Nahan’s companion, started running toward him. Yuder grabbed Kiolle, who had thankfully recovered enough to maintain a good speed, and they both sprinted.

Without looking back, they fled from the cave. Outside, the day was faintly fading as the sun began to dip behind the mountains.

“We… we finally made it out… But what the hell just happened? What was that…”

“Be quiet.”

Fighting a dizzying wave of vertigo, Yuder moved forward. This was where they had tied up and hidden two mercenary Awakeners before entering the cave.

For better or worse, the only things left were the loosened gags and ropes. No one remained.

‘Hopefully, they were discovered by Devran’s group, took a beating, and ran….’

“What… what’s this rope for?”

Kiolle exclaimed at the sight of the gags and pieces of rope. Yuder didn’t respond, just kept walking. His arm throbbed incessantly. The pain from the knife wound paled in comparison to the throbbing sensation welling up from his puncture wound.

Yet he could endure that much pain. Currently, Yuder’s mind was filled with questions about Nahan’s unexpectedly powerful abilities and his true identity.

‘Perhaps Nahan is more important than even Apeto Family. Why didn’t such a conspicuous person appear in my past life? Did he continually hide himself with his illusionary abilities? Or perhaps….’

“That one hurt a bit.”

At that moment, an unbelievable voice came from ahead. Yuder turned his head, following Kiolle’s wide-eyed gaze.

Incredibly, Nahan and the small boy who were undoubtedly left behind in the cave, as well as the still dazed mercenary Awakeners, all stood there.

‘Did I mistakenly think that what I left behind was an illusion?’

For a moment, that doubt sprouted in his mind, but Yuder soon realized it was not the case. Blood was seeping from a cut on Nahan’s forehead, proving that the collision was real. But how could they have gotten here faster than Yuder and Kiolle?

“It seems my power even surprises a great warrior like you.”

Nahan smirked at Yuder’s expression.

“It’s simple. I can use my power more deeply than usual on a few targets I choose for a certain amount of time. The duration is short,

but the effect is certain.”

“…”

“The more you doubt and get confused, the deeper you fall into the illusion. A beautiful illusion that surpasses even the senses in reality. Just like now, when you think we’ve teleported, but we actually just walked past you.”

A cold smile crossed Nahan’s face. After a moment of silence, Yuder asked,

“Why are you bothering to explain all this?”

“Because it helps to amplify the doubt. I have no choice but to do my best to incapacitate someone who managed to break even a powerful illusion that most people couldn’t endure. It’s quite beneficial.”

If what he had said was true, Yuder, who had been made a fool of his sense of time and space, was clearly heavily eroded by the power of that profound illusion.

What would happen when he was completely consumed by that ability? The face of Kishiar he had seen in the illusion moments ago flashed across his mind.

“…”

Yuder sighed, feeling both of his hands, as if they had been sliced and speckled by a blade, throb simultaneously.

‘No, let’s not think too deeply. He must have said that hoping for this kind of reaction.’

Showing signs of being disturbed was the worst thing one could do when facing an Awakener who could directly influence one’s

mind.

Yuder breathed deeply and slightly rolled up his uniform sleeve. A very small red dot was visible on the inside of his left wrist, still bleeding. It was the seal he had imprinted when he made a pact with Kiolle earlier. After confirming its existence, he felt calm again.

‘The fact that this remains means Kiolle is not dead, which means the guy next to me is not an illusion.’

There was no way the illusion would have chased him this far if Kiolle was already dead, using more of its illusionary ability on Yuder. Yuder turned his head towards Kiolle, who stood frozen, unable to utter a word.

His foolish expression somehow felt like the most certain evidence that he wasn’t an illusion, and Yuder found his mind somewhat more at ease.

‘I never thought I’d feel this way looking at his face.’

“Kiolle da Diarca.”

“Why?”

Kiolle responded with a pale, scared face.

“Stay close behind me. The moment you separate, those bastards will kill you.”

“Why would they want to kill me? Are they the ones who hold a grudge against Diarca?”

“No, it’s just that they really want to kill you because you’re such a piece of trash.”

“What…?”

Kiolle gaped, his facial expression cycling through myriad feelings of astonishment, as he looked back and forth between Yuder and Nahan.

“Still, you’re trying to protect me, right? Then I…”

“Of course I think you’re trash too. I’m not protecting you because I like it, so just shut up and stay quiet.”

Worried about any possible misunderstanding, Yuder made sure to speak clearly. Kiolle retreated slowly with a somewhat shocked expression. Thankfully, after writing the vow, he seemed to obey orders a bit quicker.

‘Whether Nahan really used the deep illusion ability or not, I can’t afford to waste more time here.’

If it wasn’t for the spreading speck on his right hand, Yuder would have been able to hold out until Nahan’s ‘time limit’ is over and capture them all here.

But that wasn’t possible now. The pain spreading up his arm was certainly abnormal, indicating that the spot was moving upward. If this continued and it somehow interfered with his ability, it was clear what Nahan, who was quick to notice, would do.

“You’re not giving up till the end, brother? How do you plan to escape my ability? Especially when you have no one to help you.”

Nahan tilted his head leisurely, as if watching the rebellion of a cornered prey.

“No matter how powerful an ability you have, if your sense of reality is breaking down, hitting me will become more and more difficult. An attack that can’t hit is just a waste of power.”

He muttered, gently patting the head of the boy standing next to him.

“Just admit it now. Your head is getting increasingly dizzy and your body heavy, isn’t it exhausting just to bear it? You’ve been looking quite strained since a while ago.”

As soon as Yuder heard his words, as if some magical incantation was spoken, his limbs grew heavier and his head began to spin again. He wondered if Nahan had noticed something amiss with his arm, but that didn’t seem likely. Nonetheless, it was clear his condition was gradually deviating from normal.

Yuder squinted as he felt an intensifying pain that felt like his entire shoulder was pulling downwards, stretching beyond his right elbow.

“Well… there’s no need, really, to confirm it.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“This is what I mean.”

Nahan’s expression subtly changed, as if he had sensed something. In response, Yuder clenched his fist instead of answering, drawing on all his strength.

Suddenly, a massive pillar of fire erupted in front of Yuder. He felt the scream of Kiolle from behind him, accompanied by a deafening explosion.

“Aargh!”

At the same time, Yuder’s right arm stiffened due to the most intense pain he’d ever experienced. The pain was so intense that it made him feel as if his vision was briefly whitening.

Regardless of whether Kiolle was sprawled out and screaming, the flames summoned by Yuder surely incinerated the surroundings, spreading higher, ever higher. The vast and overpowering flames, which obscured the figures of Nahan and others in the distance, looked like a protective wall for Yuder.

And when that fire eventually penetrated even the clouds and stretched high into the sky, Yuder felt his previously disoriented consciousness clear up, along with a sensation as if the opaque wall shielding him was breaking down, and the surrounding air became sharp.

It was a sight similar to when he first met Nahan and he had dispelled the illusion cast over the vast area.

‘So my hunch was correct after all.’

Nahan had continued to skillfully speak as if he had been using profound abilities solely on Yuder, but this wouldn’t explain why Kiolle also continued to be under the same influence. However, Yuder remembered the fact that Nahan’s ability initially affected a specific range.

‘There were many Awakeners before who could use more advanced abilities than their original ones under certain conditions. But it’s difficult to think that these conditions are exactly as Nahan himself described.’

If Nahan’s advanced ability was not affecting a certain target as he claimed, but instead adjusting the range more freely than usual, everything would be explained.

And for any ability that influences a specified range, the best way to break it is to shatter everything with an overwhelming power from within.

That was something Yuder did best.

‘He must have felt the area of the illusion ability that had been covering us breaking, and he should realize there’s no chance of winning since from that distance others could clearly see…’

Then the only choice left was to run. Yuder believed that even in such a situation, he wouldn’t be so obstinate as to insist on killing Kiolle.

Just then, the ground shook violently and Kiolle screamed even louder.

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Chapter 98

“It’s a shame that I couldn’t capture him and discern his identity, but it won’t be the last chance.”

Nahan. As Yuder whispered this name, he recalled the man who exuded such a dangerously overwhelming aura. It was rare to remember a stranger one had met only once, but that man was vividly etched in his mind.

“But… considering that I am trembling all the way up to my shoulders… I’m worried about how Kishiar will react.”

He wasn’t sure if it was his imagination, but it seemed as if he could hear his name being called from a distance. Yuder gradually extinguished the column of fire that had blazed hot enough to scorch his entire body.

The forest, surprisingly pristine for a place where a massive fire had raged for quite a while, revealed itself. Kiolle, who had been crouching with his head down, slowly lifted his head and looked perplexed at the deserted scenery.

“Where did they go, those guys..?”

Unlike Kiolle who was simply scanning the area, Yuder looked down at the few strange traces left on the ground. Seeing the ground seemingly forced open then covered again, he had an idea of the method Nahan and the boy might have used to escape.

‘A kid who can make friends, huh? I guess his friends aren’t human.’

Among the countless monsters that suddenly appeared on the continent, some had been accepted as unique native creatures,

living almost harmlessly and hidden for a long time. The Rumvet, a monster that could always be found by digging deeply into any mountain, was one of them.

The Rumvet, shaped like a giant worm, was harmless to humans as it only burrowed and lived underground. Yuder, through his long experience of monster extermination missions, knew several habits of the Rumvet.

One of them was that it would block the entrance from the inside after burrowing into a tunnel, secreting a fluid that hardened the soil. Seeing the moist ground around him emitting a faint stinging smell, he was certain that a Rumvet had indeed burrowed out of the ground and returned not long ago.

The ability to summon and control a monster hidden deep underground as if it were a friend was definitely a power worth risking danger to rescue for someone like Nahan.

The earth's intense shaking after the creation of the fire pillar must have been due to that.

'A monster-controlling Awakener… While it wasn't unheard of in my previous life, I've heard it's quite difficult to control a large monster like a Rumvet.'

If he had the power to summon and control a giant monster so silently, why didn't he escape immediately while he was imprisoned? Was there a problem with using his ability?

Remembering the silent boy, Yuder decided to also keep the boy's face in mind along with Nahan.

"Yuder, Yuder!…" At that moment, the urgent voices calling out Yuder's name were indeed real this time. They were the voices of Gakane, Jimmy, and Devran.

He had anticipated someone would rush over upon seeing the fire pillar, but he was a little surprised that they hadn't left this place yet.

'Did something else happen?'

But the first thing he felt upon hearing his comrades' voices was a strange and clear sense of relief.

"Yuder!"

Gakane was the first to appear. His face turned pale as soon as he saw Yuder standing with his left hand cut by a knife and bleeding. Gakane, who had run at full speed, carefully lifted Yuder's hand.

"My goodness, was it you who conjured that column of fire earlier? But what in the world… who inflicted such a wound on you?"

"I did."

"What?"

"Both the fire and the wound, I caused them myself."

"Yuder!"

As Yuder calmly responded, Gakane, doubting his own ears, stood in silence. Meanwhile, Jimmy, the second to emerge from the thicket, ran towards them with a worried look on his face but abruptly stopped upon noticing Kiolle, who was awkwardly standing in the rear.

"Uh…? That man… isn't he the knight from the Imperial Palace Knights? Why is he here? And in such a state…"

Hearing the cautious words of the boy, Gakane turned and finally noticed Kiolle, wearing an astonished expression.

“You are…”

“Uh, hem! Hem!”

Unable to discuss the events due to the vow he’d taken, Kiolle glanced at Yuder, coughing as if to prompt an explanation. The sight of him moments ago, terrified and prostrate on the ground, screaming, had long since vanished.

Even though he was covered in dirt, far from his usual noble appearance, Yuder chose not to comment.

“I rescued him from the ones who had taken Devran.”

“What? So, did you get hurt trying to save this man?”

“…Somehow, yes.”

“What? Yuder, you just said that you inflicted the wound on yourself. So, you hurt yourself to protect him? Why on earth?”

“What? Gakane, what do you mean?”

“Yuder said it himself.”

“Does that mean””

Before Yuder could even respond, both Gakane and Jimmy, who’d quickly exchanged a conversation, fixed their fierce gaze on Kiolle. Yuder opened his mouth, watching as Kiolle visibly stiffened in surprise.

“That’s not it…”

“What’s going on, Gakane, Jimmy? Don’t leave me behind. I still find it hard to run.”

Fortunately, Devran appeared at that moment, attracting everyone's attention.

"I saw a huge fire and thought something incredibly serious must have happened here, but it seems relatively peaceful. What happened?"

Meeting Devran for the first time in a few hours, Yuder noticed that his friend appeared much better, having changed into clean clothes and tended to his wounds.

"Yuder, where's that scarred guy who was with you? And who is this new person? What happened to those people in the cave you said you'd deal with?"

"It's a bit of a long story."

Thinking of Nahan, Yuder felt his relaxing nerves sharpen once again. He sighed softly, turning his head towards the direction of the cave. Considering the events that had transpired, he needed to return as soon as possible.

"Things got a bit complicated."

"…Complicated? You didn't let them escape, did you?"

Devran, who bore a grudge against the people of the Apeto family, asked with a grim expression.

"No. They're all dead."

"Dead? Did you kill them?"

"No."

"Then who…"

As Devran paused mid-sentence, both Gakane and Jimmy also wore strange expressions.

Looking at Yuder's unusually cold gaze, they inferred that the man who had vanished from here was likely the cause of the complication. Although they didn't know the specifics, it was clear that something significant had happened.

Gakane, sensing the sudden change in atmosphere, donned a smile and looked around before speaking.

"Alright, now that we've found Yuder, let's head down for some healing first. We can chat about the details on the way."

"But before that."

"Hmm?"

Gakane turned his head towards Yuder, who had raised his hand to interrupt.

"Why are you still here? I thought I clearly told you to evacuate and not return to the village."

"Ah… that's the thing. Zakail's brother came back and the situation changed. Do you remember? That guy who was said to be in a relationship with Devran's sister…"

"…He came back?"

"Yes. It seems Zakail tried to delay his return, but it actually sped up the man's arrival… Anyway, Zakail is locked up well. Considering we have injured, including Devran, it seemed better to rest and heal before leaving the village immediately…"

"So that's what happened." Yuder, hearing Gakane's brief explanation, quickly inferred the unfolding situation. He nodded in

response to the story that wasn’t too far from his own assumptions.

“Got it. And, Devran.”

“Hmm?”

“Did you see the two people who were tied up there while escaping?”

Devran nodded nonchalantly upon spotting the dropped gag and cord Yuder pointed to.

“Those guys? I saw them. When I came out, they were visible so I showed them some action and drove them out. Why do you ask?”

“No. It’s fine. As long as they escaped alive, it’s good.”

It was fortunate amidst the misfortune that there were still people who could testify about what the Apeto family did here. They just needed to be found and apprehended.

Yuder finally let go of the tension in his trembling arm. As he turned his head, Kiolle, who had been nervously waiting behind him, stepped back with a start.

“Kiolle.”

“W-What. You, earlier, you were in a state of emergency so I didn’t point it out, but if you keep casually calling my name…”

Even while failing to hide his fear, he attempted to reassert his authority in front of the others, which almost appeared pitiful. Yuder ignored his words and continued.

“You use informal language with me too.”

“I do! Our statuses are different, and I’m older, so where do you get the nerve…!”

Just then, a tingling sensation pulsed from the mark of contract inscribed on Yuder's wrist. It seemed Kiolle felt the same as he abruptly closed his mouth and clenched his teeth.

"…Do as you please!"

In the end, he spat out those words with a face full of humiliation before sharply turning his head away. Of course, it wasn't Yuder's business to know.

"I intend to. Anyway, those who wanted to kill you are gone now, and it seems you won't forget our agreement. So for now, you should just head back as you are."

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Chapter 99

“Return? In this state?”

Kiolle retorted in a voice thick with disbelief.

“How could I explain what happened here because of you? I have to speak of Paviel, who died…”

“That’s for you to worry about. If word reaches my ear that there has been any suspicious movement from Diarca House in the vicinity of this place, then you’ll find yourself sealed in a coffin, forever asleep.”

Looking at Yuder who murmured ominously, a curse of eternal sleep and eventual death, anger flared in Kiolle’s eyes once again. Yet, the fear of the overwhelming force he faced remained alive within him.

———

After glancing at the faces of Yuder and the people around him, Kiolle slowly stepped backward. Moments later, he turned and sprinted away without a backwards glance.

“He acted so arrogant, but he couldn’t move at Yuder’s words.”

Jimmy sneered with a satisfied look on his face, watching Kiolle disappear. However, Gakane whispered something to Yuder with a somewhat uncomfortable expression.

“Is it okay to let him go just like that? If he talks nonsense about us after he returns, we might be challenged by Diarca House.”

“No need to worry about it. He made an oath to keep his mouth shut in exchange for his life.”

“An oath? You managed that in such a short time? Well… I trust you’ve handled it, Yuder.”

Nodding in acceptance, Gakane’s gaze then fell upon Yuder’s arm.

“It seems like you’re still bleeding. Are you feeling dizzy? Let’s get moving.”

“Yeah, let’s go. If a person loses too much blood, they could faint.”

Yuder gave one last glance towards the cave entrance before heading down the mountain with his comrades. During the descent, he explained briefly about what had transpired in the cave. For a while, the three companions remained silent, apparently shocked.

Jimmy couldn’t comprehend Nahan’s strange actions, Gakane deeply regretted not being at Yuder’s side, and Devran was chilled by the words hinting that deeper darkness might be hidden behind the heinous acts committed by the Apeto family, targeting the Awakeners.

However, they all agreed on one thing: they needed to report everything to Kishiar as soon as possible.

“You are Yuder Aile, the assistant to the Commander of the cavalry, aren’t you? I’ve heard about you from the others.”

Upon his return to Hartan, Yuder immediately met with Zakail’s brother, Zachlis. His physical condition wasn’t the best, but it was tolerable considering the countless severe injuries he’d experienced in his previous life.

Compared to then, when he could only receive treatment after reporting to the Emperor despite his serious injuries, he was relatively at ease. Currently, he sat comfortably, receiving treatment for a sword wound while having a conversation with Zachlis.

Furthermore, Zachlis, unlike Zakail, was a man he could easily converse with.

“I’ll get straight to the point. I love Dermilla, and I want her brother Devran to fare well as he is her family. I will do whatever it takes to achieve that.”

“Does that mean, unlike the late lord, you won’t support Diarca House?”

When Yuder asked directly, without any sugarcoating, Zachlis’ eyes widened slightly before he nodded with a resolute look filling his good-natured face.

“Yes.”

This word was, in effect, Zachlis declaring that he could support the Cavalry and behind them, Duke Peletta Kishiar, and even further, the Emperor. If things were as they originally were, a single knight making such a statement wouldn’t have been particularly interesting. But now, things were different.

Zachlis Hartan was in a position to become the Lord of Hartan if he so wished. Even though Hartan was a small fief, it was undeniably one of the traditional and long-standing noble families of the East.

Planting someone on his side at the center of the Eastern power base that supported the Diarca family wouldn’t be a bad story for Kishiar or the Emperor.

Moreover, if Zachlis were to become their ally, they could proceed with addressing the matter of Zakail and Apeto's collusion, and the issues caused by the Apeto family in the East, much more swiftly and easily.

Having finished his calculations, Yuder nodded and met Zachlis' gaze directly.

"I understand. I will certainly convey your thoughts to our Commander. After we leave, the Commander will contact you directly. Until then, it would be best if you maintain a position no different from your previous Lord on the surface."

In Yuder's words, implying that Zachlis should maintain a friendly demeanor towards the Diarca Duchy until contacted by Kishiar, Zachlis responded with a faint smile.

"Understood. Let's keep Zakail from coming out until then. If I find the two Awakeners who escaped as you mentioned, I will contact you."

Yuder had asked Zachlis to search for the two mercenary Awakeners who had been beaten by Devran and had fled, and to monitor the vicinity of the cave where they had been hiding. Since everyone there had either died or fled, it was certain that the Apeto family would notice something amiss and start an investigation. They needed to find the escaped mercenaries before they did.

"Um… I've finished treating the wound on your left hand, but do you have any other injuries?"

Noticing that their conversation was about to wrap up, the physician cautiously interjected. Yuder looked at his bandaged left forearm and shook his head.

"I'm fine."

“Your right hand seems to be uncomfortable, too…”

Was it that noticeable? Yuder tried to ignore his right arm, which was still throbbing intermittently, and shook his head.

“I’m not uncomfortable. I’m fine. Why don’t you go?”

“Ah, okay…”

“I’m going to get up now. I hope you rest well tonight and have a safe journey back.”

As the physician stood, Zachlis also rose. Yuder had already informed him that he would leave quietly early in the morning, so there was no need for formalities.

After they had left, Yuder was alone in the bedroom. Since he had sent everyone else out on the pretext of talking with Zachlis, this was his only chance to check how far the spots on his right arm had spread.

Yuder quickly removed his gloves and the top of his uniform and unbuttoned the undershirt he had worn underneath.

‘This is…’

He had expected it, but the sight revealed under his clothes was absolutely grim. From the tips of his right fingers, over the elbow, all the way to the shoulder, his entire arm was completely stained with a dark purple hue. His forehead involuntarily wrinkled at the ominous color, resembling that of venom.

“It doesn’t look good…”

However, there was one thing that differed from his expectations. The palm of his hand had turned a deep purple, almost black, while the area near his shoulder was a very pale violet. He wasn’t sure

why there was a color difference, but he made a mental note of it, since any piece of information might be useful.

As he clenched and then released his fist, his arm spasmed again. Without thinking, Yuder gritted his teeth and exhaled. That was when it happened.

“Hey, Yuder. Are you done talking with Sir Zachlis? Listen to me for a moment. My sister, Dermilla, said she won’t be going to the capital tomorrow…”

“Yuder! I finished writing the report to send to the commander before we leave, could you check if there’s anything missing…?”

“…”

The moment Devran and Gakane, who had burst open the door and poked their faces in, saw his body and fell into silence, Yuder felt a rare sense of awkwardness.

‘I should have locked the door before undressing.’

In his hurry to check the spots, he had completely forgotten. How was he going to explain the unusual purple spot, where it came from, how it appeared, and to what extent? It felt more difficult than facing someone who killed indiscriminately.

—

“Guys, why haven’t you said a word since we left until now? Did something happen while I was asleep?”

The group that left Hartan at dawn the next day kept riding without uttering a word until sunrise. Unlike the original plan, the other Awakeners they rescued from the cave of the Apeto family, as well as Devran’s family, remained in the village. Devran was the only addition to the group, so their speed was remarkably fast.

The reason was simple. It was because of the condition of Yuder's right arm, which was revealed last night.

Yuder tried his best to explain the reason for the spot to Gakane and Devran, but it was no use. After all, Yuder himself knew nothing more than speculation that the spot was caused by the energy from the red stone.

In the end, he roughly concluded that it had been like this since before he arrived here and that he had been trying to improve the condition with the methods that Commander Kishiar knew, as the treatment method was not yet clear.

Gakane and Devran were silent for a while. Devran seemed to look at Yuder, who had come to save him despite such a terrible condition of his arm, as if seeing him anew. Gakane, who quickly guessed what "before he came here" meant, wore a complex expression. Yuder discreetly made a gesture to Gakane, avoiding Devran, and slightly shook his head. It meant not to mention it directly, no matter what he guessed. Fortunately, Gakane understood him immediately. After that, they decided to minimize the group, as they were doing now.

'After all, since Sir Zachlis is in Hartan now, there's no need to worry about the families and others staying here for a while. But you… no way.'

'Yes, Yuder. I'll send the report as it is, so take a rest for now.'

Because he was feeling slightly feverish again, Jimmy, who had gone to sleep early by himself, wasn't too surprised when they said that only four of them would go to the capital first, contrary to the plan. However, it was odd that everyone continued to ride without saying a word even after sunrise.

"There was nothing, Jimmy."

Gakane forced a smile, but Jimmy wasn't easily placated.

"But… the way you keep leading on Yuder's horse, surely something must have happened, right? It's strange that everyone is so quiet, excluding me. It makes me feel left out."

Ironically, Yuder, who had injured both arms, found it uncomfortable to hold the reins as tightly as he used to. Yuder himself didn't mind, but it was due to the objections of the others against him riding alone.

'It's still better than riding together.'

In fact, Gakane had suggested not just weaving the reins together, but actually sharing a ride. However, the horses were already too weak to accommodate two large men.

"Jimmy. You should be more concerned about your health. How's your fever?"

In the end, Yuder spoke up. Jimmy's slight fever had not subsided even after sleep, and had instead worsened. Whether it was because he thought that the tense mission was finally over, or because of some other factor, the boy's cheeks and forehead were still notably red.

Before they set off, Yuder had felt Jimmy's forehead and had the feeling that the boy would soon truly manifest his second gender.

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Chapter 100

“Don’t worry, it should be fine until we head back.”

“Speak up immediately if you feel the slightest discomfort.”

“Okay…”

At the mention of his physical condition, Jimmy instantly fell silent. In this way, the party hastened their pace towards the capital.

“If nothing unforeseen happens, we should arrive soon. How are you feeling, Yuder?”

Riding alongside him, Gakane’s voice was clearly audible. It was a question he’d asked several times before, but given Gakane’s visibly worried expression, Yuder couldn’t bring himself to tell him to stop asking.

“I’m fine.”

Although his answer implied that his condition hadn’t worsened since the previous day due to not using his powers, Gakane, unaware of this, simply nodded in relief.

“I hope we can pass through the city gates quickly today. It’s always so slow because of the sheer number of people in the capital.”

Although it was easy to leave the capital, entering was a different matter. It wasn’t easy to pass through the security check by the capital’s outermost guard.

Unless one was of imperial lineage, even nobles had to undergo a thorough security check, and only after passing through this could

they be allowed into the outermost part of the capital, towards the 7th wall.

However, when the party finally reached the checkpoint, they realized their worries had been unfounded.

“Are you part of the Cavalry?”

A soldier, seeing them from the end of the long line in front of the checkpoint, approached and spoke to them after seeing their black uniforms.

“Ah, yes. We are.”

“Do you have anything to prove your identity?”

At the soldier’s query, Gakane showed him a button on his uniform sleeve. It appeared to be a regular metal button, but in reality, it was made from a magic stone that had been processed to resist any kind of shock.

The soldier carefully examined the Cavalry emblem engraved on the button, then nodded and gestured towards the inside of the checkpoint.

“Your identity has been confirmed. Please proceed inside.”

“Excuse me?”

“When you arrive, you were to be directed there immediately.”

“Directed?”

Gakane blinked in surprise, then glanced at Yuder. Yuder could feel his concealed arm throbbing and looked at the checkpoint building the soldier was indicating. There was only one reason that could allow such an exception.

A person who could pass through the gates of the capital at will. In other words, it had to be an imperial command.

“…Let’s go.”

Yuder began walking, putting strength in his legs to keep himself from stumbling. The party quickly followed after handing all their reins to the soldier.

“I wonder who gave such an order. It’s not just to let us pass, but why are they asking us to go there…”

“Don’t worry. It must be someone we know.”

Yuder lightly patted Jimmy’s shrunken shoulders before stepping into the checkpoint. Everyone inside seemed to have been cleared out in advance, leaving the interior eerily quiet. Yuder locked eyes with a man slowly rising from his seated position.

A beautiful white face, wise red eyes under golden lashes.

The moment their eyes met, the persistent pain in his arm was forgotten.

“Exactly, it’s the third day.”

Not in his usual white uniform but dressed as befitting an imperial family member and a duke, Kishiar rose with a captivating smile in his eyes that could bewitch anyone.

“Congratulations on safely returning from your mission.”

“Commander!”

Jimmy’s startled cry echoed from behind Yuder. Only then did Yuder regain his bearings and, along with his other comrades, bowed his head in salute.

“How did you get here?”

“Thanks to this final letter that arrived this morning.”

Kishiar lightly shook the letter he held in his hand, showing it off. It was the final letter written and sent by Gakane last night. Fortunately, Kishiar seemed to have received the letter in good time before their arrival.

“If it hadn’t been for this, we might have missed each other. We were actually supposed to set off for Hartan today.”

“You, Commander?”

At Devran’s startled question, Kishiar nodded.

“I had the feeling that the situation wouldn’t be normal, so I wanted to check it out myself. Thanks to my capable assistant who finished everything in just three days, I couldn’t do that.”

Kishiar’s gaze was still soft, as if joking, but Yuder thought that his demeanor seemed a bit different than usual.

“I figured there wouldn’t be time to wait for an examination, so I ordered to call you here immediately upon your return. Perhaps it was an unnecessary consideration?”

“No, not at all. We didn’t know that you would personally come out… As you would know if you’ve read the letter, if you hadn’t sent people to find me, I might not have even been able to return from the vacation and might have died. I am truly grateful for saving me and my family…”

The usually rugged Devran blushed awkwardly in front of Kishiar. At the sight of him, Jimmy couldn’t help but cough to hide his laughter, and Gakane slightly bit his lip.

Fortunately, Devran was too focused on Kishiar to notice his comrades' expressions.

"The thanks should go to your comrades, not me. Now, you should go back immediately. A carriage is waiting behind the checkpoint."

"Ah, yes, we understand!"

After Devran, Gakane, and Jimmy hurriedly left through the back door of the checkpoint, Yuder slowly followed them. Kishiar slowly approached him and opened his mouth in a low voice that no one else could hear.

"It spread to your shoulder."

Even without a subject, Yuder immediately knew what he was talking about.

"That is the case."

"You were not the only Awakeners who went there, but you are the only one who came back injured. What am I supposed to think?"

His voice was soft but clearly lower than usual. Yuder remained silent for a moment before replying quietly.

"I apologize. I was careless."

"I didn't want to hear an apology."

Kishiar's gaze shifted from the bandaged left arm to the seemingly healthy right arm. He didn't take his eyes off Yuder's right hand for a long time.

"Does it hurt?"

"I can't deny it… It's a little painful compared to before… Ah!"

Before he could finish speaking, Kishiar suddenly grasped his right hand. It was a motion made without much strength, but as soon as he touched it, his entire right arm felt as if it was deeply pricked and throbbed painfully, making Yuder unconsciously clench his teeth.

Seeing Yuder's slightly distorted face from bearing the pain, a shadow of concern passed over Kishiar's face.

"I made the right choice to wait here just in case…"

He released Yuder's hand. Yuder endured the tingling pain and looked up at Kishiar.

"We need to leave quickly. It seems we'll have a lot to do as soon as we get back."

"Welcome back."

True to Kishiar's words, Nathan Zuckerman, his adjutant, slightly poked his head from the inside of the black carriage parked outside the checkpoint's back gate and greeted them.

As Yuder climbed into the carriage, he remembered Kishiar's face from his dream. The real-life Kishiar was undoubtedly different from the one in his dream, a fact that was more pronounced now that they were face to face.

Only then did it dawn on him that he was really back.

'…Had I been anxious all this while?'

He looked down at his own gloved hand and wondered this strange thought.

He couldn't find an answer.

—

The cavalry building they returned to appeared as tranquil as ever. After directing Gakane, Devran, and Jimmy to rest in their respective quarters, Kishiar led Yuder to his own room.

The top floor, where Kishiar resided, remained unchanged from three days prior. Walking past the magic stone stove, ablaze with colorful flames, and the Divine Sword Orr placed above it, Kishiar turned towards Nathan Zuckerman as they approached the sofa.

“Nathan, lock the door and bring the items I asked for this morning.”

“Understood.”

“Yuder, this way.”

Kishiar, who had taken off his gold-buttoned military blue coat and rolled up his shirt sleeves, called out to Yuder without hesitation. Seeing him not only roll up his sleeves but also undo his cravat, Yuder began to doubt what he intended to do.

“What are you planning to do?”

“What else could I be doing?”

Kishiar retorted briefly and opened his mouth as he turned to Yuder.

“Aren’t you undressing? Just rolling up the sleeves won’t be enough to see how far the spot has spread.”

“Ah, yes.”

Yuder sat on the sofa and took off his uniform. As was the case yesterday, his undressing was considerably slower than usual due to the injuries on both hands. After failing to undo the buttons twice, Kishiar, who was watching, frowned as if he had realized something.

“Ah, I see. Both arms… Put your hands down, I’ll help.”

“I’m fine. I can do it myself.”

“Do I have to order you even for such things?”

There was nothing he could do once the word ‘order’ was mentioned.

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Chapter 101

As Yuder lowered his arm, Kishiar, who had risen from his place, approached and deftly unbuttoned Yuder's uniform and even the inner shirt without hesitation.

Feeling a touch that was unusually practiced for a prince who rarely dressed himself, Yuder felt slightly strange.

It wasn't that he had never undressed in front of someone or been undressed, but he realized that this was the first time someone else had undressed him in this manner.

What's more, the person doing it was Kishiar La Orr. Despite spending countless nights with him in his previous life, it was an unfamiliar experience he had never encountered.

"Done."

With the last button undone, Kishiar stepped back nonchalantly, and a faint fragrance wafted from him. It was a subtle scent, different from the perfume he had given off when Yuder had come here to decide whether to go to the Shin or Sul Division.

Yuder was momentarily mesmerized by the scent, then shook his head and opened his mouth.

"You are adept at dressing and undressing."

"Well, yes. I think everyone would agree that I'm probably the prince who can unbutton and button up the fastest in the thousand-year history of the Orr Empire."

"Did you practice?"

“Practice, should I say…”

Kishiar, about to answer, faded his words for a moment and slightly lifted one corner of his mouth, only to lower it again soon.

“Well, that’s not the most important issue right now. Now, show me how much you’ve burned.”

Yuder slowly took off his shirt and gloves, looking at his right arm from which a dull pain was emerging. Kishiar’s sharp gaze went towards the violet spot spreading across the bandaged left forearm and shoulder.

” It’s hard to even call it spot at this point.”

As he watched the color of the spot darken almost to black, Kishiar murmured softly. His voice was heavier than usual.

“Is it still hurting? Answer truthfully, regardless of whether it’s bearable or not.”

As if he had guessed what Yuder would answer by his expression, Kishiar quickly added to his question. Yuder closed his mouth hesitantly, then opened it again. It felt as if his thoughts had been read because he was about to answer exactly as Kishiar had predicted if he hadn’t added that comment.

“It hurts.”

“To what extent?”

Kishiar asked back, like a doctor questioning a patient.

“As you can see, it’s not severe enough to interfere with conversation but occasionally, it hurts as if I’ve been struck by lightning.”

“Occasionally, you say? Does that mean it’s periodic or…”

“It’s intermittent. I’m not sure what triggers the sudden increase in pain.”

“Intermittent, huh.”

As Kishiar muttered to himself, lost in thought, he tapped his fingers against his knee. At that moment, his faithful adjutant appeared, carrying several items, and the conversation between the two was temporarily put on hold.

‘That’s a Purification Stone and a holy seal used in the temple? And there’s more.’

What Nathan had brought were various tools used by the priests of the Temple of the Sun God. Most of them were used for purification, but there were also items used for healing or enhancing divine power. As he carefully piled the items on the table to prevent them from collapsing, Kishiar picked up one of the Purification Stones as if he had been waiting.

The Purification Stone was known to be particularly good at cleansing impurities. It was created by imbuing a transparent magic stone, known for its cleansing properties, with a hint of divine power. Most of them had a white hue, with the cloudiness, resembling milk diluted in water, indicating an inferior quality product. The clearer and more transparent the white light it emitted, the more superior the stone was considered to be.

And, of course, the Purification Stone in Kishiar’s hand was a superior product, shining like a top-grade gemstone.

‘Even if they didn’t know, a Purification Stone of that quality would have the same value as a chunk of gold of the same weight.’

It was impressive that Nathan had managed to acquire enough to fill the table in such a short amount of time, but it was equally astonishing that Kishiar had paid the price for them.

Yuder was genuinely surprised by the fact that Kishiar had prepared so much for his treatment.

“As soon as I received the letter, I ordered everything that could help with cleansing and healing from the temple. It seemed difficult to solve with my power alone,” Kishiar quietly explained, noticing Yuder’s gaze fixed on the Purification Stone.

“It seems… quite expensive.”

“Compared to the burden of using my strength directly, it’s cheap.”

“Wouldn’t it have been easier to kidnap a priest?”

“One must be cautious when increasing the number of those who know a secret.”

In Kishiar’s words, Yuder realized that he did not see the disclosure of his secret to Gakane and Devran positively.

“…I had no choice.”

“I know. I trust that Gakane Bolunwald and Devran Hartude aren’t ones to speak easily.”

However, not everyone would be like that. Kishiar’s red eyes silently conveyed such meaning.

“I don’t intend to continue this way. There is a need to hear the opinion of your expert. However, it may take some time to find someone who is tight-lipped and experienced, so until then, let’s try to minimize the need for treatment.”

The pressure was even greater than before, given that he had bought enough Purification Stones to buy a mansion and still have

leftovers. The atmosphere around Kishiar softened when Yuder obediently nodded.

“Now, let’s begin. Could you extend your arm?”

As Yuder reached out his hand, Kishiar placed a Purification Stone on the back of it. At the same moment, a white light burst from Kishiar’s hand and began to absorb into Yuder’s skin through the Purification Stone.

‘Ugh….’

Yuder felt a tingling sensation, as if his shoulder was being pricked with needles. As he clenched his teeth and took slow, deep breaths, he saw the previously translucent magic stone gradually darken to a gray hue. Not much time passed before Kishiar removed the Purification Stone, which had become an ordinary stone, and placed it aside.

“Luckily, there seems to be an effect.”

As Kishiar said, there was a change. The range of Yuder’s shoulder that had turned purple had reduced compared to before the Purification Stone touched it. However, the problem was that the reduction was only about the size of a finger joint.

“However, the effect seems less than anticipated. We might run out of the prepared Purification Stones at this rate.”

As Nathan, standing behind them, quietly responded, Kishiar nodded and picked up a symbol of the Sun God from among the piled objects.

The divine symbol, adorned with twelve radial stripes of gold and silver of varying lengths encircling a red ruby, exuded a sanctity that was entirely different from the ordinary wooden ones commoners

would carry around. It was a luxurious item that seemed fitting for a pope to carry.

“Surely, he wouldn’t give me such a flashy item,” thought Yuder. Perhaps noticing Yuder’s apprehensive glance at the divine symbol, Kishiar chuckled softly.

“Don’t worry. It’s my job to handle this.”

“That’s a relief…”

“This divine symbol was created with blessings bestowed directly by the 45th Pope, known for his particularly strong divine power. It’s a good medium to amplify divine power.”

Kishiar wound the gold chain connected to the holy symbol around his hand and lifted another Purification Stone. The second stone that touched the back of Yuder’s hand transformed into something resembling a black pebble within minutes.

However, it was apparent that the effect was slightly stronger than before. The purplish hue that had been hovering around the shoulder line had noticeably receded below the shoulder.

After confirming the effectiveness, Kishiar began the repetitive process in earnest. Each time he infused the purification stone with divine power and touched it to the back of Yuder’s hand, the purple specks gradually disappeared downwards, revealing the original white skin beneath.

But the pain that felt like a knife stabbing and twisting continued, and soon Yuder’s forehead and back were drenched with cold sweat. Flecks of sweat could also be seen on Kishiar’s forehead as he continually exerted his divine power.

“If you keep gritting your teeth like that, you’ll hurt them. Better to talk about something.”

“…What should I talk about?”

Kishiar picked up a new purification stone and spoke again as Yuder responded a little late.

“There must be stories that couldn’t all be written in the report.”

“…”

“For example, stories about an Awakener named Nahan who had illusion abilities.”

Kishiar continued as he infused the purification stone with divine power.

“Or the political situation in the East as seen from your perspective, or stories about the Apeto and Diarca families. Anything will do.”

“If I start now, it will sound too disjointed… Wouldn’t it be better for such a report… to be received separately later?”

Due to the pain that surged like sparks from time to time, Yuder’s responses had unwittingly slowed. Despite showing an astonishing lack of distress or discomfort on his face, pain was still pain. Kishiar managed to muster a quiet smile at his assistant who seemed too accustomed to enduring pain.

“Why waste time like that? I’ll filter it out myself, just go ahead now.”

With that, Yuder couldn’t argue. Despite the ongoing pain and tension that made his head increasingly numb, he rummaged through his mind and finally started to speak about the topics he had intended to bring up.

The suspicion that Nahan was more than a mere bandit, the powerful illusion ability he had which could kill people without any visible attack, the need to investigate the strange research taking place in the Apeto estate, and even the conversations he had had with Zachlis Hartan as these sporadic words flowed out unchecked, Kishiar used up a dozen more Purification Stones.

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Chapter 102

“So, in my opinion, allying ourselves with Zachlis Hartan and establishing a link in the east could turn out to be… a beneficial choice in the long term.”

“That sounds sensible. My elder brother would approve.”

Kishiar, who had chimed in with Yuder’s words, scrutinized the purple speckles that had trickled down to his elbow before he lifted his eyes. Hidden beneath his long eyelashes, his crimson irises clearly locked onto Yuder’s face.

“But, what about this man named Nahan? What did he look like? The report only mentioned a large scar on his left face.”

Yuder slightly furrowed his brows, unable to grasp Kishiar’s intention for such a sudden question. Kishiar subtly gestured towards Nathan Zuckerman, who was behind him.

“Did he appear to be of southern origin like Nathan?”

Yuder’s gaze turned towards Nathan Zuckerman, who was sitting expressionlessly. His skin hue was unique, casting a distinct red shade, and the brilliant blue eyes under his ashy hair contrasted with his complexion, creating a striking impression.

The red skin tone he possessed was one of the most commonly thought features of the southerners. But, in Yuder’s memory, Nahan had an ordinary skin color, except for his scar.

‘His hair color was somewhat similar to Nathan Zuckerman’s eyes…’

Yuder recalled Nahan's hair, dark enough to appear almost black, contrasted with his cold, gray eyes.

However, there were countless people with deep blue hair or gray eyes. They did not have features as immediately noticeable as those of the southerners.

He had not dismissed the possibility that even that appearance could have been conjured by illusion, but Yuder, sensitive enough to sense the faintest energy released during power usage, doubted it.

"I'm… not sure."

"Do you know that Nahan means 'revenge' in the southern language?"

"Pardon?"

That was news to him, despite his rebirth. Caught off guard, Yuder blurted out a question, and Nathan, who had been standing behind Kishiar, slowly opened his mouth as if he had been waiting.

"Sanan re Uzan. Nathan re Gamu. Ruhan re Nahan. Moda Suyrin Anzan neum re Ur."

It was a language with a unique accent. Yuder recognized that Nathan spoke in the southern language, but he didn't comprehend its meaning. He only registered the words 'Nathan' and 'Nahan' tucked in the middle.

"What did you just say?"

"Birth and death, blessing and curse. Mercy and revenge. Everything is as the day and night of the desert. I recited an old southern adage."

With that, Nathan added another sentence.

“It’s one of the most famous proverbs where the word ‘revenge’ is used.”

Indeed, isolated from the rest of the continent by a vast desert, the area had unique proverbs.

“What does it mean?”

At Yuder’s question, Nathan opened his mouth as if he had been waiting.

“The desert’s day is parched and scorching, devoid of a drop of water. However, the night is so cold that everything you have freezes. Since even the day and night bound in the same day are so, it’s natural for everything else to be contradictory. It means, strive for what you want, either way.”

Before Yuder could fully contemplate the meaning of those words, another wave of agony surged along his arm, and he gritted his teeth, bracing against the pain.

“Then, may I ask, what does the word ‘Nathan’ within you signify?”

“Blessing. It’s a name I bestowed.”

The answer unexpectedly came from Kishiar. As he set down the Purification Stones, now devoid of light having used all its purifying power, his expression remained stoically calm. However, Yuder was greatly surprised by his words.

“Are you… saying this, Commander?”

“It’s the name bestowed upon me when I was freed from slavery in my youth and brought into the palace. His Highness chose that word after hearing a certain maxim.”

Yuder had never heard this from them in his previous life. He knew that Nathan Zuckerman, the adjutant who had long served Kishiar and hailed from the southern country, but he was shocked to learn that it all started from his time as a slave during his youth.

‘It wasn’t just about emancipation, Kishiar bestowed a Knight’s title upon him, made him an adjutant, and kept him by his side until he became a swordmaster… This is no ordinary bond.’

And the fact that such information was hidden from the public suggested that Kishiar highly valued his adjutant and greatly appreciated his abilities.

Even though Kishiar, his lord, who had given such great favor to him, could not have been ignorant of who had killed him, Yuder wondered why Nathan Zuckerman in his past life did not seek revenge against him, but quietly disappeared from the Peletta territory.

A question he had deliberately avoided pondering in his previous life suddenly resurfaced. Regardless of Yuder’s thoughts, Nathan continued speaking.

“That’s why I think his name is probably not his real one.”

“That… makes sense.”

“Actually, after receiving the first report where you wrote his name, I initiated an investigation under His Highness’ order. There seemed to be an individual, assumed to be the same person as ‘Nahan,’ who had been gathering Awakeners in a similar manner throughout the empire since a year ago.”

Upon hearing the unexpected news, Yuder even forgot his pain and lifted his head. Nathan, as if understanding Yuder’s surprise, slightly nodded.

“We had a fairly easy time finding him thanks to a considerable amount of records left by those who found him suspicious and reported him. Whenever a certain number of people gathered, he would lead them abroad and then return alone to repeat the same thing in another area. As you surmised, there’s a high chance he belongs to a certain group.”

“So… he might return to the empire again.”

“Most likely, yes.”

When Nathan agreed with Yuder’s words, Kishiar immediately followed up.

“We’ll have to report him to His Majesty as someone to watch out for. We’ll need to send a missive to the administrators in each region. Further investigation will also be necessary.”

While it was still unclear what the future held, if they continued tracking Nahan’s information, there was a high likelihood they would see him again. Yuder decided that if he met Nahan again, he would definitely capture him alive and bring him here.

“But Yuder,”

Kishiar called Yuder as he brought a new Purification Stone.

“Yes.”

“I heard that you injured your own arm to break free because of Nahan’s powerful illusion ability, but the report did not mention what kind of illusion power you experienced exactly.”

As soon as he finished speaking, a sharp pain, as if stabbed by a knife, surged up. Seeing Yuder’s fingers twitch, Kishiar spoke softly.

“What kind of power was it? What have you seen that you’d felt compelled to injure yourself?”

“…”

Yuder looked at his arm, trembling with pain independent of his will, with a gaze soaked in consternation. What kind of illusion had he seen? As if he could ever tell.

Perhaps it would’ve been better for him to leave and reveal the violet spots on his arm in front of everyone. After all, the thing Yuder truly wanted to hide wasn’t the spots, but Kishiar that he had seen in the illusion.

What face would the man before him make if he confessed that he had seen him? Regardless of how he would interpret it, the atmosphere would definitely become awkward, and on top of that, the Kishiar in the illusion was not the Kishiar of the present, but the Kishiar he had killed in his past life. That was the real issue.

He could never tell. Bearing the pain radiating from his aching arm, Yuder opened his mouth.

“…Must I really tell you?”

Kishiar, who had slightly widened his eyes at his question, offered a subtle smile, apparently pondering over something.

“Oh. Perhaps you’ve seen something embarrassing? Someone naked, perhaps…”

“What are you thinking? No, that’s not it.”

His resolute response was naturally met with a chuckle.

“Ha-ha. Truthfully, you don’t need to explain in detail. As long as we know the type, we can find a way to handle it the next time we

encounter it, and inform the entire Cavalry. That's all."

While he had no intention of revealing what he had seen, keeping it a complete secret was proving difficult. After a moment's thought, Yuder decided to provide a simplified version of the information.

"It seems to show the target an illusion that triggers their fear."

"Fear? How does it know what they're afraid of?"

"I suspect it pulls from the target's memories to construct the illusion. Considering those who have succumbed to insanity from the illusions, I thought it was better to get out of it early, even if it meant hurting myself."

At Yuder's calm explanation, Kishiar slightly tilted his head.

"I'm glad it worked, but I'd prefer if you didn't resort to such methods next time you two meet."

If they were to face a similar situation again, Yuder wouldn't hesitate to harm his arm once more. However, he chose to remain silent in front of Kishiar for now. Meanwhile, Kishiar had already consumed more than half of the Purification Stones, piling them on one side of the table.

Considering the Purification Stones had lost their power and become useless, it was as if a large sum of money was being spent in a very short time. But Kishiar showed no sign of regret.

"Now… finally, it's reached inside the elbow."

Kishiar gazed satisfactorily at the progress he'd made. The spot had been reduced to half its size due to his generous use of the Purification Stones, so his sense of accomplishment was justified.

"Take a break and wipe off your sweat."

At Kishiar’s light gesture, Nathan Zuckerman immediately approached the table and handed him a handkerchief he’d pulled out. After watching Kishiar wipe the sweat from his forehead and neck, Nathan also offered a handkerchief to Yuder, who was gazing blankly.

“I’m fine, actually…”

“Wipe yourself off. You’re soaked far more than me.”

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Chapter 103

“So, the Duke says so.”

Yuder fell silent for a moment, examining the intricate embroidery on the handkerchief in his hand. It was clear at a glance that the handkerchief was made with care from a fine fabric. It seemed too extravagant to be used to wipe the sweat of someone who wasn’t even its owner, only to be discarded afterwards.

“Then it might be better to give me a towel instead. As you said, it’s a bit… insufficient to wipe with just this piece.”

Perhaps agreeing with his reasoning, Kishiar ordered Nathan to bring a towel. However, what appeared next was a piece of fabric similar to the handkerchief he had seen just a moment ago, only larger, still beautiful and seemingly very expensive.

“Why, don’t you like this towel either?”

“No…that’s not it.”

Ultimately, Yuder gave up on finding a less luxurious item in this room and wiped his body with it. Although the coloring had diminished, the aftereffects of the intense pain he felt each time the Purification Stones touched him persisted, drenching his entire body in sweat.

He felt the lesson was that he must never repeat his previous actions if he didn’t want to go through this hardship again.

‘He must not have wanted me to heal with the Purification Stones…’

If it had been an ordinary person, rather than Yuder, experiencing this pain, they would have already fainted, screaming. To be honest, Yuder's strength was not in abundant supply either.

"You should take better care of your body. Just because you have strength doesn't mean you should use it recklessly."

At that moment, as if reading his thoughts, Kishiar clicked his tongue and Yuder turned his head in surprise.

"Are you pretending not to have the ability to read minds?"

"It's written all over your face."

Even though he knew it was a metaphor, he almost instinctively touched his own face. Watching Yuder with an amused look, Kishiar continued.

"You're surprisingly easy to read."

"I've often heard the opposite."

Exhaling a sigh and retorting, Yuder heard Kishiar mumble a 'Oh well.' and smile.

"Those who find you hard to read haven't really looked into your eyes. Looking at expressions isn't the only way to read someone's intent."

Upon hearing this, all the responses Yuder was about to utter vanished from his mind.

A feeling of unease slowly crept up from his stomach. Ever since he looked at Kishiar's face again, he had been feeling this way, but now it was especially strange. Yuder averted his gaze, avoiding the piercing red eyes on his face.

'Theres no difference from the usual nonsense he speaks.'

Why couldn’t he think of a retort? As he traced back the origin of his feelings, he thought perhaps his brain, still affected by the illusion, had not fully returned to normal.

‘Yes, Im tired That must be it.’

His arm had not yet fully recovered, let alone his mental state.

It was just that. He decided to think of it that way.

“Are you very tired? You suddenly look pale.”

His concealed emotions seemed to have betrayed him through his expression. Kishiar suddenly ceased his laughter and asked.

“No, Im fine.”

“No, you’re not. Your lips are even turning blue. The discoloration has spread to the inside of your elbows, so put your clothes back on. Nathan, get more stones for the stove.”

“Yes, understood.”

As Nathan Zuckerman left to fetch more magic stones that would fuel the fireplace, Yuder quickly donned the shirt he had set aside.

Through the rolled-up sleeves, his still nearly black discolored back of his hand was revealed. As Yuder’s gaze drifted to it, Kishiar also looked at the same spot.

“How’s the pain? The discoloration has reduced, so it should be getting better.”

“I’m… not quite sure yet.”

He’d hoped that the pain would disappear once the discoloration had returned to its initial state, but even now that it was reduced by more than half, the intermittent pain persisted.

Yuder clenched and unclenched his trembling hand. A tingling sensation raced from his fingertips up to his elbow, delivering a discomforting pain. He could feel sweat breaking out on his forehead again. He never enjoyed the feeling of his body not obeying him.

“Don’t worry too much. Even if we can’t heal it completely now, we will definitely find a way.”

It seemed Kishiar offered consolation, thinking Yuder’s serious expression was due to the pain and the discoloration.

Kishiar, who had scolded him for his reckless act, looked genuinely concerned when Yuder seemed genuinely discouraged. Yet, feeling more uncomfortable sitting here, Yuder diverted the conversation, claiming it wasn’t for the reason Kishiar assumed.

“Speaking of which… How is the research related to the Red Stone going?”

“Ah. That’s what you’re asking about.”

After Yuder had left for the mission to save Devran, Kishiar had immediately set up a lab in the basement of the building, where the mages could research the Red Stone. Since yesterday, Kanna Wand was sent there to build familiarity with the mages and assist in their research.

“So, if you visit them tomorrow, they will all be glad to see you.”

“I understand.”

The fact that the Red Stone research had started was good news. Yuder quickly forgot about the queasy feeling he’d just had.

‘I need to check on the progress of the research, enhance and refine the training of the entire Cavalry. I also promised to visit Enon… I need to do that as soon as possible.’

Back in this world, there were many things he needed to attend to, far more important than Kishiar La Orr's idle chatter. The man in front of him was someone Yuder had to guard against, not someone to get entangled with as in his previous life.

"Your Highness. Is this enough to add?"

At that moment, Nathan, who had returned with a hefty pouch in his hand, pulled out a handful of magic stones and asked.

"A little more than that."

"Understood."

When Nathan threw the magic stones into the furnace, multi-colored flames sprung up and radiated a bright light through the decorative holes. It wasn't long before the large space began to warm up.

"Are you going to start the treatment again?"

"I was going to… but you seem to be struggling. I'm thinking of calling it a day and continuing tomorrow. I called you for treatment, not to make you collapse. How about a cup of restorative tea before you go?"

Kishiar answered Yuder's question. However, Yuder immediately shook his head without hesitation. They had already exchanged almost all the reports and conversations they needed to have for the day. He had too much to do to waste more time.

"No. I prefer to get it over with quickly. Let's finish it all today."

"Are you sure?…"

Kishiar's crimson eyes scanned Yuder's face, still wet with cold sweat, his flushed cheeks, and the inside of his unbuttoned shirt.

“Are you sure you’re okay? It seems like you’ve reached your physical limit. Being stubborn isn’t a good thing. If you pass out, the speed at which the Purification Stones absorb power will decrease.”

“I’ll be fine. I won’t pass out.”

Despite knowing that Kishiar’s eye was accurate, Yuder responded firmly.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure it’s not that you feel pressured by my invitation to have tea?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

His heart skipped a beat, but Yuder feigned calm and replied as if he didn’t understand what was being said. Thankfully, Kishiar didn’t pursue the matter further, although he did tilt his head with a look of dissatisfaction.

“Something I said clearly didn’t sit well with you… I can’t guess what it might be, so I suppose it can’t be helped. Very well. If you insist so strongly.”

The hand wrapped in the divine seal picked up a handful of Purification Stones.

“It seems that as the discoloration darken, more divine power is required to remove them, so from now on, I’ll increase the quantity and add holy water. Remember your promise not to pass out.”

Kishiar opened a bottle of holy water that he had never used before and poured it without hesitation over the Purification Stones in his hand. Astonishingly, the holy water didn’t drip down his hand but

was absorbed directly by the stones. The Purification Stones, having absorbed a whole bottle of holy water, held much stronger divine power and emitted a transparent white light.

As soon as Kishiar's hand touched the back of his own, Yuder closed his eyes and gently bit his lower lip.

Soon, a pain so intense that it threatened to blacken his vision hit his entire body.

—

'Now, it's time to hear why you knocked down five of your colleagues to the point of them becoming like wounded soldiers. Is there anything else you want to say, Yuder, apart from what I've heard?'

Yuder looked up at Kishiar standing before him. Seeing his face, utterly unreadable under the well-maintained smile, a sudden surge of anger welled up in him.

'I did nothing wrong. They got hurt because they lost to me in a duel, agreed upon mutually. Even if they are in the state of wounded soldiers, that's for them to deal with, and I don't think it's a matter worthy of summoning me, sir.'

'Right. That duel. No one said how it happened in the first place. Why did it start?'

'What could I do when they said they couldn't accept me ascending to the Commander's position? Didn't you say the best way to gain someone's respect is to show strength?'

So he did exactly that. Yuder felt no guilt.

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Chapter 104

He had heard the jeers of his colleagues as he returned to his quarters after finishing training for the day. They seemed intent on making sure he heard their complaints.

Such characters had always been numerous, even when he was merely a deputy commander. But ever since Kishiar La Orr had nominated him, Yuder, to succeed as the Commander, each day was filled with insults that struck him like blows to the back of the head.

To be honest, Yuder himself didn’t understand why Kishiar, who had been doing so well as the Commander, would suddenly decide to step down, or why he would pass the position onto him, of all people. But, objectively, he could only surmise it was because there was no one else in the unit stronger than him at that time.

The units mood was more menacing than ever due to an accident during a recent monster extermination mission, which had resulted in the death of some members. Yuder had intended to brush off most of the insults he had heard, but those rascals had crossed a line.

That bastard sure has it easy. Everything was settled after he offered his ass to the Commander!

He was the one who was supposed to be in the monster extermination team, but the Commander stole him away, saying he had to train his successor. So, poor Gakane had to go instead

That bastard who only plays with the Commander doesn’t even know who died. I’m so jealous. It’s hell for the rest of us every day.

Beyond the curse-laden rumors, they laughed with cold mirth. Yuder stopped in his tracks and turned around. Upon making eye

contact, they flinched in surprise but quickly attempted to hide their fear and stepped forward.

What are you looking at? Got something to say?

Seems like the ones with something to say are you lot.

Yuder’s voice was low, anger simmering beneath the surface.

Do you want to be the Commander?

What?

Do you want to be the Commander? He repeated.

What nonsense is this? What if I do? Are you going to hand over your position?

That could be arranged. Provided you can defeat me.

Upon hearing that he would readily relinquish his position if any of them could defeat him, they eagerly lunged at him.

After thoroughly beating the dimwits, Yuder gathered them up like a bundle of dried fish and dumped them in the middle of the dining hall, visible for all unit members to see. That’s how the situation ended up as it was.

He never desired the position of Commander. He didn’t enjoy engaging in foolhardy antics under the pretense of bonding with his colleagues. He never wanted any of it, but the cold insults always seemed to follow him.

‘…’

It was Kishiar La Orr who had nominated Yuder Aile as the next Commander.

Yet, why did all the disputes aim only at Yuder? Of course, he was younger and of lower status, but that didn't stop him from getting angry, despite the reasons being glaringly obvious.

Yuder recalled the harsh words his beaten and fallen comrades had spat out like curses. He disliked all of what they had said, but particularly detestable was the rumor that Yuder had offered his body to the Commander.

Had the claim been completely false, he would have easily dismissed it. However, no matter how it happened, the fact that he had engaged in a sexual relationship with the Commander was true.

Even though it was due to an incident, the fact that the rumors were not baseless and he couldn't outright deny them stung his pride even more.

Your anger still hadn't subsided.

'Would it have subsided for you? It's because of this incident in the first place…'

'Right, it's all my fault. I get it.'

Kishiar's response was soft, as though he had read the resentment hidden behind Yuder's words. Yuder, who had deliberately been provocative, momentarily closed his mouth at that gentle reply.

That's how it always was with Kishiar. He was a man capable of repelling pointed swords aimed at him with the ease of a feather.

'But, Yuder. I said that showing appropriate strength could be one way of gaining respect. I never insisted that it should be the only way to deal with others. Am I right?'

'That…'

Yuder looked at Kishiar, then avoided his gaze and bowed his head.

‘…Yes.’

Ever since Kishiar had named Yuder as his successor, he was frequently absent. Whenever he returned, he called for Yuder and taught him many things, but apart from the practical matters, the rest was mostly airy talk.

Still, occasionally some of his words proved helpful in setting future policies. One of them was that a person with strong power should not use it recklessly.

Frankly, it wasn’t a statement that entirely resonated with him. Yet, seeing Kishiar himself demonstrating such behavior, those following him couldn’t help but be influenced.

To Yuder, who had only been interested in training, Kishiar was like his first mentor who instilled in him a sense of responsibility and the mindset needed for a leader.

If only their relationship was simply one of respectful admiration. Then he could ignore whatever nonsense those around him were saying.

‘I definitely made a mistake.’

At Yuder’s insincere apology, Kishiar let out a chuckle.

‘Even so, you followed the duel protocol as you said, so it’s not as big of a problem as before. Personal emotions are hurt, but that’s that.’

‘Well, that’s good.’

‘At least you’re considering how to rectify your actions in the future, which is fortunate. Consider how I felt, hearing this news right after returning from Peletta. Can you imagine how surprised I was?’

‘…’

Ever since Kishiar declared that he would pass his position to Yuder, he was often away. Mostly, he visited his fief, Peletta. But his frequent absences left Yuder, who had to manage affairs in his absence, with a sour taste.

What were those left behind to do when he disappeared without reason? The one who should’ve thought about the consequences before acting wasn’t Yuder, but Kishiar.

Yuder felt a desire to voice a complaint, but swallowed his words. Maybe because he had dealt with the incident caused by Yuder right after returning from Peletta, Kishiar, seated at his desk, looked paler than usual.

Despite the shadows under his eyes and the color draining from his lips, his beauty still rivaled the manifestation of the Sun God. However, all Yuder could see was the deep fatigue etched on his face.

Ever since the previous Emperor had passed away and the new Emperor ascended the throne, Kishiar’s excursions had been becoming more frequent. Rumors circulated quietly that the reason he was relinquishing his position was due to conflicts with the current Emperor, with whom he shared no blood ties.

However, the concern that weighed heavier on the minds of the Cavalry members was the potential disbandment of the Cavalry following Kishiar’s resignation. The new Emperor originated from a family not particularly friendly towards Awakeners, so such worries held considerable credibility.

Among all these swirling rumors, the absolute trust Kishiar La Orr once received from the members gradually began to fade. Fear and unease were instead directed in full force toward Yuder, the common-born successor designated by Kishiar.

Everyone wished for Kishiar to do something. After all, he had a responsibility to the Cavalry as their commander.

Yet, Kishiar had done nothing so far. Apart from when teaching Yuder, he never disclosed his intentions or plans, even to him.

Yuder wanted to know why Kishiar was resigning, why he chose him as a successor. These were, in truth, the things Yuder most wanted to understand.

Yet, sometimes, what seemed the closest was often the farthest.

Wouldn’t it be better if someone else took the Commander’s position, not me? Yuder blurted out impulsively as he looked at Kishiar, who appeared fatigued. Although it was a spur of the moment, it was a sentence he’d repeated more than ten times already.

No.

And as always, Kishiar’s response was succinct and firm.

Aren’t you tired of this repeating itself? There are plenty of people in the Cavalry who, even if not as powerful as me, have a higher status and are competent. Choose one of them as your successor. I just want to focus on my training.

At Yuder’s words, Kishiar gave a slight, sardonic smile.

Do you think I’m handing over the position of Commander to you simply because you’re powerful?

Isn’t that the case?

Of course not.

Yuder furrowed his brows deeper.

What on earth was he saying then? Yuder, well aware of his own strength, was equally able to critically assess the rest. He, Yuder Aile, was unsociable and hardly fit in with others, his demeanor always cool and detached, uninterested in anything he disliked.

Born a commoner without friends, it was laughable to think he could succeed the perfect Kishiar La Orr as Commander.

So what is it, then?

Your keen eyesight.

Yuder was momentarily speechless at the answer that flowed calmly. It was only when Kishiar began to chuckle, as if finding Yuder’s expression amusing, that he managed to open his mouth.

I don’t understand what you mean. I’d appreciate it if you could explain it in a way a commoner like me could understand.

How many times have I told you that you’re no longer a commoner? Lord Aile. Belittling yourself is not good. If you’ve forgotten

No.

Of course, he remembered. And it was true that Yuder’s current title was that of a lord. However, the world refused to accept someone of common origin, regardless of their received title.

And what was important wasn’t that right now.

What does keen eyesight’ mean?

Hmm. Seems like we’re not communicating well. We used to connect better. Has your charm decreased a little while my deputy commander wasnt watching?

Commander.

As Yuder’s voice turned ominous, Kishiar tilted his head and laughed heartily.

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Chapter 105

Understood. I apologize. I'll answer, so ease the grip of your hand. The flame has been ignited, yes. The notion of keen eyesight… it's just that, quite literally. You, Yuder, calmly assess the situation regardless of what it may be. Whether it involves an enemy, an ally, or even yourself.

Anyone with reason can do as much.

I apologize, but I can't.

At the unexpected confession, Yuder hesitated, and Kishiar raised his hand, beckoning him closer. Yuder glanced at the luxurious white glove that enveloped his hand, then slowly moved towards him.

Even when he felt he had approached close enough, the man continued to gesture him nearer. Frowning at the continuous beckoning, Yuder navigated around a large desk to stand directly in front of Kishiar. This time, a suddenly outstretched hand grabbed his arm and pulled him in.

Within moments, Yuder found himself seated on Kishiar's lap, embraced in his arms.

…What are you doing? It's broad daylight.

See, this causes me to make completely subjective decisions.

A sweet voice lingered near his ear.

But you're capable. We need someone like you as the next Commander of Cavalry, someone who can grasp their surroundings under any circumstance. Isn't that the epitome of keen eyesight?

I’m fairly certain that resorting to this to make your point… is not a good decision.

Isn’t it, though?

Despite the reproach in his words, Kishiar grinned nonchalantly. Yuder endured as Kishiar gently caressed his cheek, knowing it was the only area that had been injured during his duel with the others.

That must have hurt quite a bit.

It wasn’t too bad. I’ve applied some holy water with healing properties, so it should heal soon.

Because of the smooth leather glove, Kishiar’s touch always felt cold. There was only one occasion when it wasn’t so.

A time when they were together in a room during an invisible night.

You seem a little… thinner than before.

I’m not sure about that.

Moderate your training a bit. At this rate, we’ll need to adjust your uniform before the Commander’s inauguration ceremony.

While he spoke, the hand that had been lightly caressing his rib area through his clothing slipped down to encircle his waist. The breath that had been grazing the top of Yuder’s hair while he inhaled and exhaled steadily began to slow and thin.

Listening to the slow and deep breathing that sounded as if he was scenting, Yuder let out a quiet sigh, careful not to be heard.

There were times when Kishiar returned after stepping away, calling Yuder close to behave as if he was sniffing an animal. Therefore, when he had just called him closer, Yuder had prepared

himself for another such event, and he was glad his intuition hadn't been mistaken.

Why would he behave this way when he surely knew that Yuder didn't emit any special energy or scent like other second gender manifesters?

Despite his curiosity, knowing that he wouldn't receive an answer, he decided not to say anything. Even so, sitting on his lap still felt a bit awkward.

In their interactions, Kishiar was typically the one to initiate conversation. Hence, moments like this, filled with silence when Kishiar closed his mouth, always made Yuder feel peculiar. Even though he had touched his partner's bare body, the current situation seemed to make him feel more restless than those moments.

'…Yuder. The tactical game I taught you before. Do you remember?'

Then, at last, Kishiar, who had been only breathing slowly and quietly, opened his mouth. Yuder instinctively stiffened his shoulder and replied.

'Yes.'

'The rules associated with the special piece?'

'I remember.'

Not long ago, Yuder had learned a two-player tactical game from Kishiar. In that game, there was something called a 'special piece', not a regular piece that existed from the beginning, but a sort of secret weapon that the player secretly designated from among the regular pieces before the start of the game.

Although the special piece could exert power beyond its original movement limit, due to the nature of the game where two players took turns, once it was used, it was always eliminated by the opponent.

Therefore, most often it was used only at the crucial moment when the victory had been nearly secured after being well hidden. Since losing the special piece meant having to return some of the opponent's pieces they had taken, many did not even designate it in the first place.

As Yuder was recalling these rules, Kishiar continued his words.

'The worst thing you can do when using the special piece is to get caught by the enemy before using it. You suffer a great loss.'

'…'

'So, if I feel like my special piece is about to be exposed, I take the initiative and put it out as a bait in front of the enemy.'

'Does such an obvious strategy really work?'

To his skeptical question, a response mixed with laughter returned.

'Surprisingly, it does. Even though they think that the piece right in front of them might be the special piece, they continue to doubt because of the potential penalty that might come back if it isnt. It works especially well on those who believe that the more openly revealed, the less valuable it is. To save something, sometimes such a ruthless method of putting it at the forefront is necessary.'

He had thought that Kishiar had brought up the tactical game to say something important, but it turned out it was just about the game.

Anyway, since Kishiar often talked about such nonsense, Yuder was not greatly disappointed and responded casually.

‘If it works, it’s a good tactic. I dont particularly think it’s a cruel method……’

‘But from the point of view of the special piece, wouldn’t it be considered cruel? It’s supposed to be a piece that’s treated preciously and takes up the most important part of the board, after all.’

Yuder doubted for a moment whether Kishiar might be drunk. Was he really saying that the hard stone-made piece used in the game was pitiable?

‘Firstly, it’s not like we asked for the consent of the piece when choosing the special piece. How to use it is up to the person playing the game.’

‘That’s true.’

‘Knowing that, why are you asking? Did you suddenly develop a fondness for the stone-made pieces?’

Kishiar was silent for a while. Just when Yuder half-forgot their pointless conversation and started to think about the impending headaches he had to deal with, Kishiar gently nudged his back with a soft touch, prompting him to stand.

‘Alright. We can go back now.’

Kishiars face, as Yuder stood and turned, looked as calm as always. However, Yuder thought, for some reason, his red eyes staring at him seemed oddly subdued.

—

The first thing he saw when he opened his eyes was not the small barracks where Yuder always fell asleep and woke up, but the high ceiling painted with a beautiful golden sun symbol.

Yuder blinked, staring at a ceiling he had grown tired of seeing in his past life, before slowly rising to a sitting position.

‘Here… this is the guest room in the command post quarters. Why am I here?’

His head felt empty and lethargic, a momentary confusion setting in. However, when he lowered his gaze to the blanket he held with both hands, his memory suddenly cleared.

‘Ah, that’s right. After receiving treatment from Kishiar, I said I would return to my room…’

Yuder hadn’t fainted until the discoloration on his arm was reduced to its original size, just as he had told Kishiar. The horrifying ordeal was endured in silence, a feat so impressive that even Nathan Zuckerman, who was simply observing, couldn’t hide his admiration for Yuder’s perseverance.

The problem occurred after the treatment was finished. He intended to get up and leave as soon as he put his clothes back on, but the moment he tried to stand, his strength drained from him.

And so, he found himself here.

“…”

He must have collapsed immediately upon trying to stand. Given the difficulty of moving a passed-out person to the regular member’s quarters, they must have left him here. While he could guess the rough sequence of events, it only deepened his self-loathing.

Even when he had been tortured, flesh stripped raw from bone, he hadn't fainted. But to collapse from merely having a spot on his arm healed with divine power was shameful. He didn't want to guess what Kishiar and Nathan were thinking.

Straining his ears, he found the outside to be incredibly quiet. Judging from the dark landscape visible beyond the curtains, it seemed to be night, making it likely that Kishiar was sleeping in his own room.

'It's probably for the best…'

Figuring it would be better to carefully return to his original quarters while Kishiar was asleep, Yuder rose from his bed and stepped onto the floor. His vision blurred for a moment, but he was able to keep from passing out again by leaning on the wall.

Suddenly, he remembered the dream he'd had. It wasn't exactly a perfect dream, but more like a brief reenactment of a moment he'd shared with Kishiar in his past life. Since it was such a long time ago, some memories were so blurry he wasn't sure if they were real, but Yuder thought they probably were.

'I can't remember the specifics… but I did learn strategy games from Kishiar.'

Also, during the days when he was a candidate to succeed the Commander, it was true that his colleagues would constantly pick fights with him.

'Back then… I was indeed too young. It was so hard for me to ignore such comments.'

While he was outwardly twenty, internally he was an experienced veteran, he was confident he could handle the same issues without getting angry. However, it wasn't the case back then.

Even though it was a dream, it was rare to objectively observe oneself from such a distance. After all, it was those moments that had shaped him into who he was today. Yuder felt anew how impressive it was for Kishiar to patiently teach the young Yuder Aile with a smiling face.

Kishiar had complimented Yuder's keen eyesight, but from Yuder's perspective, it was Kishiar who truly had the keen eyesight.

'But I'm not sure why I dreamt of that period now. I wonder why?'

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Chapter 106

Why was it that now, of all times, an event deeply submerged in his unconscious mind had surfaced? Yuder pondered for several minutes over this question to which he could find no answer. Recognizing that returning to his lodging was his priority, he moved his feet.

Several steps ahead, a uniform cloak was neatly draped over a table, and gloves were placed nearby. Slipping them on and clenching his fist, he felt a very faint tingling in his right hand that soon dissipated.

It had been a while since the pain, almost washed away, had nearly disappeared. Had his body recovered while he was unconscious?

‘Seeing how well Ive recovered, money indeed does wonders.’

It was natural for him to recover quickly. After all, a priest with a divine power as strong as Kishiar’s was rare, let alone one who also amplified it with the highest-grade Purification Stones that absorbed holy water.

‘But I don’t want to go through such chaos again… I really need to restrain myself from blindly using force to solve everything.’

The ways in which an Awakener could use their power were limitless. In his previous life, Yuder had enjoyed overwhelming enemies with tremendous power, like a vast sea, as he wished. He hadn’t needed to research ways to achieve more effect with less power, but now things were different.

Most would be discouraged, but Yuder thought it turned out quite well. There was nothing more pleasurable to him than honing and

developing his skills. He had often thought that, had he not become a Commander in his previous life, he would have spent his entire life cooped up in a training room.

While contemplating this, Yuder crossed the hallway and went into the study room. Suddenly, he saw a flickering light ahead and stopped in surprise.

‘Kishiar?’

By the fireplace, the flickering light revealed the side profile of a man sitting at a desk, penning something. No matter how Yuder looked at it, it was Kishiar, whom he had presumed to be asleep.

His gaze was momentarily stolen by the shadow of the mans face illuminated by the small lantern.

Was it because of the thick shadows, or the expressionless face he usually hid well? The sight of him sitting in darkness, his hand clutching a quill pen, moving sharply, felt both strange and familiar.

Even in his previous life, Yuder had occasionally seen him working late into the night, illuminated by a single lantern.

At that time, they often spent the night together, so seeing him at work was inevitable, but he did not expect to see that scene again now. Perhaps it was because he had just dreamed about the past. His feelings were complex.

“…Youre awake already?”

At that moment, Kishiar, sensing Yuder’s gaze, lifted his head. Yuder had thought he hadn’t given any sign, but Kishiars keen senses were indeed exceptional. A playful smile crossed his face, and his previously somber look disappeared, replaced by an aura of vitality.

“Do you know how surprised I was when you fainted right after waking up, despite saying you wouldn’t?”

“I apologize.”

“Well, as you said, you didn’t faint until the treatment was over. So, we’re half-right each. No need to apologize.”

“Why didnt you wake me up immediately then?”

“How can I forcibly wake up someone who fainted from exhaustion? It’s late anyway, so just get a good night’s sleep here. Oh, how’s your arm?”

Despite the softness in his voice, he seemed to have no intention of accepting any rejection. Yuder glanced back and forth between the door he could leave through and Kishiar at the desk, then let out another sigh.

“…It’s all better.”

His feeling of numbness still lingered somewhat, but a little more rest would naturally take care of it. At Yuder’s response, Kishiar responded with a satisfied smile.

“Well done.”

“But… What are you doing up at this hour, Commander?”

He was practically wide awake already. Even if he were to go back to bed, he did not feel like sleeping. As he sat down on a chair near the desk and asked, Kishiar looked at the paper he had been busy writing on.

“I’m writing letters.”

As he spoke, he tapped on three sheets of paper laid out side by side.

“One is for His Majesty the Emperor. Another is for the Pelleta Knights, and the last is for the acting Lord of Hartan.”

The content of the letters to the Emperor and the acting lord, Zachlis Hartan, would be predictable. Most likely, they contained a report of the recent incident and a request for cooperation in the investigation. Then, could the letter to the Pelleta Knights also be in support of that?

“Is it because of this incident?”

“Yes.”

Kishiar nodded, confirming that Yuder’s guess wasn’t wrong.

‘Surely… it makes sense that he’s staying up late to handle urgent matters.’

Writing letters wasn’t his only task; quite a few documents and bundles of paper were piled next to Kishiar. Seeing him dip the tip of the pen into the ink again, Yuder impulsively opened his mouth.

“Is there anything I can help you with?”

“Of course, there is. Going to bed.”

“…”

When Yuder remained silent, Kishiar, who had stopped writing for a moment, laughed out loud.

“You can even make such an expression.”

“This is my usual expression.”

“No, it’s not. Look here.”

Kishiar lifted his hands and pulled at the corners of his eyes. The combination of the sharply raised eyelids and the red eyes sparkling and looking around from underneath was somewhat comical.

“When did I ever do that?”

“Now.”

Yuder, who was about to refute that he had never done that, shut his mouth when he saw Kishiar’s eyes gleaming as if expecting such a reaction.

‘Even though I’m back to being twenty, my mental age isn’t… what am I even doing with Kishiar?’

This was too childish a conversation for two grown men to be having.

“If you say so, Commander. Then, that must be the case.”

“You always pull yourself together and step back at crucial moments. Is it because of your keen eyesight?”

Kishiar looked slightly disappointed, but Yuder was taken aback by his mention of ‘keen eyesight’.

“Yes?”

“Why are you so surprised? It’s a fact that you have keen eyesight. You can discern everything from the subtle changes in the energy of the Awakeners to the power held by inanimate objects like the Red Stone and Divine Sword.”

“Ah yes.”

So that’s what he meant. Recognizing that it was similar yet different from what he had heard in his dream, he managed to quell his surprise.

“And if you really can’t sleep, come over here and take some of these.”

Kishiar, who had previously told him to go and sleep, now pushed a stack of letters towards Yuder, who was sitting blankly.

“This is……?”

“The letters are intended for the Cavalry. Originally, I had Nathan sort them, but strictly speaking, he’s not part of the Cavalry. Henceforth, this will be your job as my assistant. After reading them, categorize them by importance. Put the most important ones on top, and relatively less important ones beneath.”

Despite his detailed explanation, Yuder was already familiar with such bundles of letters. After all, he had seen plenty of them in his previous life.

“Am I allowed to determine their importance at my discretion?”

“You’ll get the sense once you read them. Either way, I’ll reread all of them, so don’t worry.”

Having said that, Kishiar picked up his pen again, freshly dipped in ink, and resumed writing his letter. Yuder pulled the bundle of letters closer and opened one on his lap. Although it was dark, the light streaming from the magic stone stove made reading the words not too difficult.

‘This is… an invitation to a party. The next one is also a party invitation. The next one… a request for deployment of Cavalry members?’

Most were party invitations sent by nobles living in the capital to Kishiar, who was both an imperial family member and a duke.

The next most common were requests to borrow the power of the Cavalry members, but the ones that had plausible reasons written on them were few and far between.

Most contained ludicrous requests such as wanting to borrow an Awakener to escort high-ranking nobles or to perform tricks at parties. It seemed that the nobles living in the capital still did not fully understand what the Cavalry and the Awakeners were.

‘Unbelievable.’

Yuder promptly moved these letters to the bottom. Once he had shifted most of them, only two remained.

‘One is a letter asking for help in exterminating monsters that suddenly appeared in the west… and the other one…’

Yuder looked down at the remaining letter, sealed with red wax stamped with a crest. It was the emblem used in official letters sent from the palace. Inside the envelope, a concise letter was found.

The letter that began with ‘To the illustrious descendant of the Sun that knows no darkness, Duke Pelleta, Commander of the Cavalry, Lord Kishiar La Orr’ was a request for his participation as an imperial family member in an official event and party at the palace, in commemoration of the upcoming harvest season.

Only then did Yuder recall that in his previous life, not long after the Cavalry was established, an event commemorating the harvest season was held.

‘Right, that was it. We made a ridiculous parade behind the Imperial Knights and the military band as the formal introduction of the Cavalry… we became a spectacle for the nobles at the event.’

Still, the Cavalry members were quite encouraged by the fact that they stood with dignity among the nobles for the first time. That day

was also the first time the Cavalry showed their faces on the official stage in front of the entire continent.

While reminiscing about those times, Yuder happened to spot a small note added at the bottom of the letter, which made him widen his eyes slightly.

'…Additionally, as a result of our meeting, we have decided to include an additional schedule following the Cavalry parade on the 26th. We will soon inform you of the confirmed details related to the changed schedule…'

"…An additional schedule?"

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Chapter 107

Without realizing it, Yuder voiced his question in a small murmur, which caused Kishiar, who had sharp ears, to lift his head.

“Is something amiss?”

Hesitating for a moment, Yuder rose from his seat and handed the letter to Kishiar.

“I believe you should read this immediately.”

Kishiar, having quickly read the letter from Yuder, stopped at the final section. Interest welled up in his red eyes.

“An additional schedule, huh? Who suggested and approved this? I thought everyone was trying to avoid cramming more in.”

“Isn’t it ultimately up to the Emperor to decide on such schedules?”

Although he was currently the Crown Prince, the Emperor Katchian, whom Yuder had served in his previous life, was the type who insisted on personally verifying everything. If put positively, he was cautious; negatively, overly suspicious.

As he grew older, he began to doubt everything more and more, and in the end, he didn’t even dare to deal closely with his overly powerful subordinates. Yuder was also on his list of guarded targets.

The current Emperor Keilusa looked entirely different from Emperor Katchian, but Yuder was quite surprised to find out that their basic way of handling affairs wasn’t the same.

“There are countless events taking place during the harvest season. His Majesty cannot handle all of them. The majority are handled within the palace.”

As Kishiar folded the letter and placed it in a conspicuous position, he raised the corner of his lips.

“I have a hunch about whose influence this is, but I’ll have to confirm it. Looks like I’ve got one more letter to write today.”

He has a hunch? Who could Kishiar be thinking of? Yuder was extremely curious, but since he would find out once the results came in, he simply nodded and stepped back.

—

“Yuder! You’re back!”

The next day, at breakfast, Kanna, who Yuder encountered in the dining hall, was overjoyed to see him.

“Did you hear? I’ve been assigned to work with those… mages, under the Commander’s orders.”

“I heard. I was actually thinking of going there later.”

Kanna, who had been whispering to keep the other members from hearing, brightened at Yuder’s response.

“Really? Archmage Yulman and Mage Alik were both eager to see you again. They’ll be thrilled if you visit today.”

Given that she was now on a first-name basis with them, it seemed she had built quite a rapport in a short time.

Yuder listened to her talk about how excited the mages were when they heard about Kanna’s abilities, how they were eager to test her, and how the three of them were planning their research

together, while he quickly shoveled soup and bread into his mouth. Seeing him practically gulp down his food without chewing, Kanna, who had been chatting away happily, shot him a puzzled look.

“Yuder, why are you eating so fast? You didn’t starve while you were on your mission, did you?”

“No… I’m just hungry since I got back.”

In truth, he planned to eat as quickly as possible so he could meet Enon in the town during the morning, but he couldn’t tell her that outright.

‘Besides, it’s true that I’m hungry.’

The pain in his arm had prevented him from eating properly yesterday. Given that he had also fainted in that condition, it was almost as if he had gone a whole day without food.

Even though he hadn’t felt particularly hungry when he woke up that morning, the moment he descended to the dining hall and inhaled the aroma of the food, an insatiable hunger crashed over him.

“Yuder! You’re here early!”

The joyous voice of Gakane echoed from behind Yuder, just as Yuder was tearing into his eighth piece of bread, dipping it in his soup, while listening to Kanna’s story.

“I knocked on your door earlier, but there was no answer. I thought you might have fainted or something in there.”

“Fainted? Why would you think that, Yuder’s not ill?”

Before Yuder could respond, Kanna waved a hand in greeting, starting a conversation with Gakane. A brief flicker of surprise

flashed across Gakane's eyes, but he quickly found a plausible explanation.

"After returning from yesterday's mission, unlike me, Devran, and Jimmy, Yuder spent some private reporting time with the Commander. If it were me, I would have been too exhausted today and just slept all day in my room. But Yuder, you're really something. Ha ha."

"I see. Why wasn't Devran able to come back? I heard he went to the infirmary without breakfast this morning. Did he get hurt? Everyone keeps talking about it."

Upon hearing Devran's name, Kanna asked, belatedly recalling a point of curiosity.

"Yes. He ran into some trouble with a noble from his hometown, and was detained. He got slightly injured in the process. But everything has been sorted out, so he'll recover soon after treatment."

"That's really a relief. It seems the Commander did the right thing sending the rescue team early."

It was fortunate they had agreed on what to say in case their comrades asked about the incident the day before. A shared understanding passed between the gazes of Yuder and Gakane.

'Yuder. How's your arm?'

While Kanna was passionately cursing the noble for what they had put Devran through, Gakane covertly tapped his own arm with his fingers to convey his question.

Yuder gave a slight nod in affirmation. His right arm was back to normal after yesterday's hellish treatment, and though his left arm was still bandaged, it was concealed beneath the sleeve of his

uniform, unlikely to be discovered. A wave of relief and bright joy passed over Gakane's face.

'That's a relief.'

"What are you mumbling about, Gakane? Aren't you listening to what I'm saying?"

"Ah, it's nothing."

"You were whispering something to Yuder, weren't you? Or weren't you?"

Just as Kanna, with a suspicious look in her eyes, was about to further interrogate Gakane, the dining hall door suddenly burst open, and a familiar face amongst the members rushed in, flushed and excited.

"Did you all hear? Something incredibly exciting just happened!"

"What is it?"

As one of the members eating his meal asked with curiosity, the newly arrived member grinned and raised his voice so everyone could hear.

"A messenger from the Imperial Palace came. Guess what? The entire Cavalry has been invited to attend a party at the palace during this harvest festival!"

"A party?"

"At the Imperial Palace?"

"Really? If all the members gather, it's over 300 people. Are we all going? Will the Commander allow it?"

The unbelievable news stirred everyone in the dining hall. Surprised looks etched onto the faces of Gakane and Kanna.

“Is it really true? A party The only parties I know are those we used to have at Gallon House, where the servants would gather in the kitchen with leftover food.”

Next to Kanna, who was muttering in astonishment, Gakane turned to Yuder with a serious expression.

“Yuder. Have you heard anything? You’re the Commander’s assistant.”

“…No.”

In truth, he had already learned of the fact while organizing a letter that had arrived for Kishiar the previous day, but Yuder decided to keep his mouth shut for now.

“I see. Since the messenger only just arrived, you would have heard it for the first time too. If it’s true, wouldn’t the Commander gather everyone and tell them himself?”

Listening to Kanna’s words, Yuder glanced at the surrounding members. Most wore astonished expressions, but amidst those were hints of excitement, expectation, and nervousness.

‘Sending a messenger to announce this publicly, making sure everyone knows about it… it means that Kishiar is being compelled not to refuse the invitation.’

Kishiar, as the Commander, had the power to decide whether or not the Cavalry would participate in any event. Unless directly ordered by the Emperor, there was no exaggeration in saying that Kishiar, a member of the imperial family and a duke, wouldn’t feel pressured to attend any event. But what would happen if he refused to accept an event that all the members were eagerly anticipating?

‘Even if he says he refuses, there would be a significant disappointment, considering they had all hoped for it.’

The true power of leading a group comes from the trust and support of its members. Being a genuine leader isn’t simply about maintaining the title. The most needed strength for Kishiar, who was establishing a new group called the Cavalry, was exactly that.

‘Whoever it was, they’ve played a pretty clever hand.’

As Yuder pondered this, the rumor spread endlessly throughout the Cavalry. Yuder left the barracks, passing the excited members engaged in lively conversation, quickly changing into civilian clothes.

The atmosphere of a city excited for a grand festival was palpable as he made his way to a rundown pharmacy tucked away in a poor alley where Enon lived. The excitement wasn’t limited to the members of the Cavalry.

“I’m not open for business today. Go away.”

However, Enon’s shop was naturally an exception to this atmosphere. After scanning the interior of the shop, still covered in a layer of dust and clutter, Yuder opened his mouth toward a boot sticking out from behind the counter.

“It’s me.”

“And who is me?”

“The one who commissioned you.”

“…”

At that, the boot that had been swinging listlessly froze. After a moment, Enon rose from his spot with a loud thud, and met Yuder’s apologetic smile with an angry glare.

“I got caught up with something and got delayed. Sorry.”

“Sorry? You just said sorry? You’re even worse than a dog-gnawed bone. Do you even know how many days I’ve been waiting? Why am I picking up your scraps? Get out!”

He had attempted to create a light-hearted atmosphere with a smile, but it seemed to have had the opposite effect. Yuder quickly dropped his smile and reached into his pocket to pull something out.

“Here.”

“What is it? I don’t need it, so leave”

Enon, about to shout something angrily, stopped mid-sentence as he saw what Yuder held out. It was a bright yellow lemon he had bought from the market before entering the slum.

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Enon had glared at the innocent fruit for quite some time before finally extending his hand over the counter. Yuder gently placed a lemon on his palm.

“…Who told you? That I’m crazy about these?”

Enon asked in a significantly softened tone, far from the seemingly lethal resentment he had just expressed. Yuder, recalling his past life where Enon would often munch on raw lemons, opened his mouth. He had found Enon’s love for lemons incomprehensible back then.

“I can’t tell you now.”

“Again with that? Damn it.”

Cursing, Enon bit into the lemon, peel and all. The act looked as if it would set his mouth on fire, but he swallowed it down without a flinch.

“It tastes good. Damn it.”

Having devoured the lemon in an instant, Enon finally subdued his anger and met Yuder’s gaze directly.

“I’ve waited for you and even tolerated your tardiness. You should know what an honor this is. Come with me.”

The inside of the shop where Enon led him was still cluttered with old odds and ends, but there were a few tables and small chairs that could accommodate customers.

Yuder looked at an old red cloth hung on one wall, so worn that its pattern was unrecognizable, several rusted swords carelessly leaned near the entrance, and a bed with one side heavily sagged. They were all just like what he had seen in his previous life, stirring a mix of emotions.

“What are you doing standing there like an idiot? Sit here.”

Enon gestured to Yuder with his gruff face as he sat at the table. Yuder cleared the pile of old books occupying the chair and sat down in front of him.

“You said you needed information about those who carried the name La Orr among the past dukes.”

“Including Kishiar La Orr.”

Yuder added, causing Enon to frown.

“Ah, right. Anyway, as you should know if you have any common sense, it wasn’t easy to investigate. To find a duke carrying the name La Orr, I had to go through the royal family tree, and what you wanted was even more detailed information.”

However, what Enon pulled out from his pocket was a fairly thick bundle of papers.

“But thanks to your late arrival giving me extra time, I was able to gather roughly this much. It would be hard to find such detailed information anywhere else on this continent.”

“Thank you…”

“Before that.”

Enon slapped away Yuder’s hand, which had been reaching to accept the papers along with his thanks.

“If you want to receive something, you have to give something. Why are you trying to take as if it’s a given?”

“Isn’t it enough that I know the name ‘Guardian of Luma’?”

At Yuder’s question, Enon flared up in anger.

“Of course, it’s not enough! Who the hell are you? What are you doing and where? How did you come to know about me? Start talking. If not, I’m going to burn this right here.”

As if to show that he wasn’t joking, he firmly gripped the bundle of papers and brought a match close to it from among the clutter on the table. Though a rough item prone to sudden explosions, it was more than capable of setting a fire quickly without the aid of expensive magic stones.

Yuder sighed softly, looking at Enon’s stern expression. He had long concluded that, based on experiences from his previous life, Enon was a person he could trust no matter what. He had planned to reveal his identity soon anyway, so saying it now wouldn’t matter. However, explaining how he knew Enon’s name was a slightly different matter.

‘…Will you believe me?’

Who could possibly believe him if he told them that after he died once, he woke up and found himself 11 years in the past? However, Yuder thought that the person in front of him, Enon, might be the one who could most easily believe such an implausible story in this world.

The reason was simple. If Enon, a being difficult for most to comprehend, being the Guardian of a great mage that existed a millennium ago, then there was a high probability he would believe Yuder’s seemingly absurd tale.

‘In the past, I was curious and suspicious about Enon’s identity… I didn’t expect the tables to turn this way.’

Would he truly believe Yuder? Could he understand why this happened?

Yuder looked into Enon’s bright, lemon-yellow eyes as he forced a bitter smile.

“Alright. I’ll tell you. My name is Yuder Aile. I come from commoners. I’m currently a member of the Cavalry, and I awakened my powers two years ago.”

“Yuder Aile… I don’t recall.”

Enon repeated Yuder’s name, a thoughtful expression on his face, as if wondering whether he had met him somewhere and had simply forgotten. However, no matter how much he pondered, there was no way he could find the answer on his own.

“You’re part of the Cavalry, the new one that’s been formed?”

“Yes.”

“The one with Kishiar La Orr as the Commander?”

“That’s correct.”

As Yuder succinctly replied, a forced smile spread across Enon’s face.

“This… You’re not completely mad, are you? Are you trying to investigate the background of the Commander of your own group? Isn’t that tantamount to treason?”

“Of course not. My intention is actually the exact opposite.”

Unfazed by Enon’s attitude, Yuder calmly retorted.

“The opposite?”

“My goal is to protect Kishiar La Orr at all costs, to keep him from dying. But to do that, I felt I needed to know a bit about the secrets of these illustrious individuals who are shrouded in mystery.”

Enon’s eyes flickered. His expression was as if he wanted to say ‘don’t lie to me.’ However, he couldn’t find any traces of deceit in Yuder’s face or voice.

“You’re not lying.”

“I told you so.”

“You crazy man.”

Enon cursed again. Despite Yuder giving him a proper answer, he was still subjected to Enon’s abuse, which made him feel slightly wronged.

“Why would you do such a thing? Why would you want to protect someone who’s an imperial family member, a duke, and even a Commander? What can you do just because you have some information? Are you going to thwart an assassination or something?”

“No. Not at all…”

“Then why on earth?”

Enon’s golden gaze was filled with curiosity. Yuder felt this was his chance to say something.

“If I were to tell you that I came from the future, would you believe me?”

“That’s not a funny joke.”

Enon’s first response was to dismiss it as a joke. As it was an anticipated reaction, Yuder calmly retorted.

“But it’s true.”

“Huh. Time-related magic was the only thing that Luma couldn’t succeed in. Did you become a great mage of the century or something? There’s a limit to joking.”

“Don’t you think you’re the one who can best determine whether I’m joking or not?”

“That’s why I’m saying it’s nonsense, you bastard. That’s a realm no one has ever succeeded in, you understand? Do you have any proof that you’ve traveled back in time? You don’t, do you.”

“Just because nobody has succeeded doesn’t mean it’ll never happen. Ordinary people might not believe you’re Luma’s guardian, so why is this any different?”

“That’s a separate issue.”

“Then where do you suppose I learned of your true identity?”

Piercing through Enon’s dismissive deflection with his soft retort, Yuder was able to make him change his expression for the first time.

“…What?”

“All I know about you, you’ve revealed to me yourself. You’re the Guardian of the Archmage Luma, you said you’ve lived for a very long time, you’ve gathered information here and there, and you liked lemons. I know more beyond that. That’s my proof. Still won’t believe me?”

Yuder saw Enon blink rapidly, his eyes wide and astounded. His expression flickered with confusion, surprise, skepticism, and

disbelief, then became sharply serious. It was a look Yuder had never seen on him before, despite having observed Enon for a long time.

Yuder felt a weighty pressure, as though he was slowly sinking into cold, deep waters. However, he managed to maintain composure, showing no change in his outward expression.

“…What’s your purpose, then? Why did you seek me out?”

“Like I said, to protect Kishiar La Orr.”

“You came back in time for that? Such a grand action for just that reason? Are you telling me to believe that?”

Enon seemed to quickly pick up on the fact that Yuder wasn’t telling the whole story. It seemed he had to reveal more to satisfy Enon. After a brief hesitation, Yuder decided to share the larger goal he had in mind, which would gradually unfold with time.

“…And I want to prevent the same events from happening again, before I came back here.”

“Hmm. Okay. Now it’s starting to make sense. The same events… Are they personal?”

“No personal issues. That’s all for now.”

After stating that, Yuder added one more sentence.

“The reason I came to you is because I thought you were the only person who could help me with this matter without tricking me.”

“Tricking?”

Enon’s expression changed dramatically in an instant.

“I can’t leave this to an information broker who could potentially trick me. There are limits to the information I can find myself.”

“…So you really just wanted this information?”

“That’s what I said.”

From Yuder’s perspective, he was entirely sincere, but Enon looked incredulous.

“Each word you say sounds like a complete lie, yet why can’t I shake off the feeling that you’re not lying? Is something wrong with me?”

Enon, heaving a deep sigh, shifted his gaze to the bundle of papers in his hand. Alternating between looking at Yuder and the papers, he slowly put down the match he had been holding in his other hand. The cold, tense atmosphere then eased back to normal.

It was brief, but Yuder remembered the intense pressure he had felt from Enon. It was a power unlike anything he had ever felt before; somewhat similar to magic yet not, and also different from the energy emanated by Awakeners. It was a strange energy.

Perhaps it was a power inherent to his being a ‘Guardian’.

“I didn’t ask you to believe me right away. You can take your time to watch and judge.”

“Why should I watch you? Didn’t I clearly say that I would only help you this one time?”

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“Why should I watch you? Didn’t I clearly say that I would only help you this one time?”

Despite his words, Enon was not as cruel or indifferent as he pretended to be. Yuder, who had received his help on several occasions, knew this fact better than anyone.

The ones I am trying to save are not only Kishiar La Orr. You are also included. And so are the many others who have been lost due to ignorance in the past.

Swallowing the words he couldn’t say to Enon, Yuder reached out his hand.

“Are you not giving it to me?”

“You… You’re not really planning a rebellion, are you?”

Despite his numerous assurances to the contrary, Enon repeated the same question before handing over the paper, clearly still uneasy.

“No.”

“…”

Even after hearing the firm answer, Enon hesitated a bit before slowly handing the paper to Yuder. As Yuder unfolded and began to read the document, Enon couldn’t hide his suspicious gaze and opened his mouth.

“By the way, you must read and leave it here. It’s absolutely forbidden to take it outside.”

“Understood.”

Since highly classified information was often read and disposed of quickly on the spot, Yuder wasn’t surprised and simply nodded.

Enon’s eyes grew perplexed as he watched Yuder, a mere soldier from commoner background, reading the document filled with difficult terms and seeming comfortable handling confidential information.

It was far too early for such a look. What exactly was this familiar sight?

Regardless of Enon’s thoughts, Yuder remained focused on the document in his hands. The paper contained detailed information about the imperial family, a topic he had never been curious about in his previous life.

‘Most of it is information I already roughly knew…’

There were a total of ten people who had become dukes with the imperial family’s surname ‘La Orr,’ including the current Duke Peletta, Kishiar La Orr.

Considering the empire’s thousand-year history, it seemed a small number. However, on the flip side, it was astonishing that these ten had largely been forgotten, with their names barely recorded in history.

There was hardly any official information about them. Only the years of their birth and death, and the names of the territories they had ruled as dukes, were known.

Rumor had it that the dukes who bore the surname La Orr all had significant defects that made it difficult for them to live normally as princes. They received the nominal title of duke, thereby permanently losing their rights to the throne, but in return, their lives and safety were guaranteed until death.

Yuder was about to skip over the sections containing information he already knew when a particular part caught his eye. It was the section transcribing the birth and death years engraved on the tombstones of the previous dukes who had held the surname La Or before Kishiar.

‘Come to think of it… they all died quite early.’

According to the records, all nine of them died before they turned 30. It was too soon. Even peasants, struggling to live day by day, mostly lived past 50. This made it even more surprising.

‘I wonder if the major defects… included physical aspects as well as mental.’

“They share quite a few common traits. They all died young, never married, had no children, and severely restricted their external activities. Considering they even died within their own territories, it’s almost like they were imprisoned.”

Enon opened his mouth with a grim face as if he realized where Yuder’s gaze had stopped.

“You know, apart from Kishiar La Orr, whom you said you’d protect, there isn’t anyone else who showed their faces in the Capital’s high society. Very few remaining portraits, and there were six who were isolated in remote areas and raised from the time they were born. But do you know what’s more interesting?”

“What is it?”

“Out of ten, six were born in the last 300 years.”

Hearing that, he looked down at the paper once again, and indeed, it was as Enon said. Yuder realized that including Kishiar, a total of six people were born within the past 300 years and his eyes widened.

“It’s really strange considering that the duke with the surname of La Orr first appeared 200 years after the empire was established. Even I found out while researching this time.”

“So is it… a problem related to the imperial bloodline?”

As Yuder opened his mouth, thinking about a certain hypothesis that crossed his mind, Enon nodded.

“It’s plausible to think so.”

The imperial family of the Orr Empire has long been revered, being referred to as having inherited the blood of the Sun God. Although the geopolitical situation of the continent has changed a lot now, with countries that were once vassal states gaining independence or increasing their power, and the Orr Empire no longer occupying the absolute position it once did, people living on the continent still held a degree of reverence for the imperial family.

Having superior abilities and overwhelming appearance befitting the inherited blood backed up such reverence, but what if there was a problem with the so-called perfect bloodline?

Just imagining it felt like blasphemy, denying the god. However, Yuder had long realized that the imperial family was ultimately just human, like him.

‘They are humans, after all.’

And many people who face insurmountable problems tend to avoid them and just hide them well enough to not attract attention, like the mere title of Duke given to the ten royals including Kishiar…

“The remaining records are extremely scarce, so it’s not clear exactly what the problem was with the Dukes bearing the surname of La Orr. But it’s likely not physical. There hasn’t been a case where someone was deprived of their succession rights because they had

a minor physical disability, right? Like Tilar who had difficulty with his legs since birth, or Crown Prince Zekeim who returned half-paralyzed after a war."

"Indeed…"

Yuder agreed with Enon's assumption, nodding. Among the past emperors, there were those who had physical disabilities from birth, or those who had acquired physical problems. However, he had never heard anyone questioning their abilities as royals.

'So is it mental? But Kishiar seems perfectly fine.'

There must have been some common defect between the nine previous Dukes and Kishiar to have maintained the title of Duke of 'La Orr'… yet he had no clue what it could be.

Yuder flipped through the bundle of papers, lost in thought. The next page contained rumors and remaining records related to the nine deceased Dukes. Most of it was nonsense, near groundless rumors, but Yuder focused on a certain common point that appeared among them.

- Before death, they had rapidly weakened over several months, and their appearance was like a corpse drained of all blood by a monster.
- Those who had witnessed the Dukes before their death were all reportedly shocked at their appearances, as they had become as shriveled and dark as a corpse, their former visage nowhere to be seen.

The most detailed story among similar ones was the information about the ninth Duke, Laflamme La Orr, who died 33 years ago.

- He is said to be getting weaker day by day. Now he can't even walk by himself and is suffering, but no more painkillers seem to have any effect. Following his wishes, I've decided to dismiss

everyone working in the castle, except those brought from the palace. I wish only for his comfort until the day he departs, but sadly, given past cases, it is highly likely that this will not be the case…

“Whose account is this?”

“That? A letter sent by the Duke’s adjutant to his brother.”

Although I was very curious as to how a letter sent by someone as close to the Duke as his adjutant to his kin ended up as a reference, it didn’t seem like Enon was going to give me any answers.

‘If this is information left by the Duke’s adjutant, then the ‘previous cases’ mentioned are likely referring to former Dukes who were in the same condition.’

So, does this mean that while the information was strictly classified externally, within the imperial family everyone knew these facts?

Yuder recalled the image of Kishiar from his past life just before his death. He hadn’t drastically withered like a corpse or become too weak to walk on his own in the months leading up to his death as described in these accounts. However…

‘The fact is, Kishiar looked more and more tired and thin as time went on, unlike how he is now.’

Kishiar had been in such a state even before stepping down from his position as Commander of the Cavalry. While this might not necessarily point to commonalities with the Dukes mentioned in this information, Yuder was somehow continuously bothered by it.

“The part about Kishiar La Orr you were looking for is in the last chapter.”

As Yuder was carelessly flipping through the pages filled with various rumors, Enon pointed out where the section he was looking for was. Hearing this, he brought the last chapter forward, and saw information written rather succinctly compared to other chapters.

“Is this it?”

“I left out common knowledge since he’s still alive. Only things not widely known are left, and that’s about it.”

Enon was correct, but there was one problem. Since Yuder had been fairly close to Kishiar in his past life, he already knew most of the information provided.

‘The rumor that he became the new owner of the divine sword. That’s true… And the fact that he can use divine power. That’s true as well. The rumor that he learned magic from the senior court mages in his childhood… I’m not sure about that. He might have been misunderstood because he carries around a lot of magic tools…’

In his past life, Yuder had seen Kishiar freely changing his appearance and wandering outside his quarters using a special magic tool. These days, he doesn’t use it much, but if someone who didn’t know it was due to a magic tool saw this, it could have been misunderstood.

‘It is said that the private soldiers he raises in the Peletta territory are actually a powerful force, and at the Emperor’s command, they can rush to the capital and execute any rebels… Is this just a baseless rumor?’

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The remaining members of the Peletta Knights in Yuder's mind were few in number. They were efficient guides, but their skills, with the exception of Nathan Zuckerman, were quite ordinary.

'Yet, they did cook well in the field…'

He had almost reached the last sentence among the scant information on Kishiar.

- Originally, the position of the Crown Prince was set to be Kishiar La Orr's. However, about 20 years ago, due to the strong influence of the then Empress, Inella La Orr, at the imperial family meeting, Keilusa La Orr was appointed as the Crown Prince. It is said that the late Emperor and Empress Inella had a major dispute over this issue for several years, and their relationship was not good.

Was the position of Crown Prince originally intended for Kishiar?

No matter how many times he read it, the sentence remained unchanged. Yuder, holding the paper where the related section was written, extended it towards Enon and opened his mouth.

"Enon. Is there any basis for this section?"

"Indeed, many of those who attended the meeting at the time are still alive, so the information is quite reliable."

Enon responded dryly to the section that Yuder pointed out, but it was still unbelievable.

'Kishiar was almost the Crown Prince?'

Although the Orr Empire does not determine the Crown Prince by age and traditionally chooses after the princes have grown to some extent, it was indescribably strange to think that Kishiar might have been sitting on the Emperor's throne by now.

'…I can't imagine it.'

However, if such a thing had really happened, it might not have been bad.

Kishiar La Orr was the most perfect leader Yuder had ever seen. People said that the ability to manage a Knight Order or Cavalry and the ability to take responsibility for an entire country were different, but was it really so?

He could confidently say that Kishiar's abilities were much superior to the Katchian Emperor he had seen in his previous life. While it was hard to imagine him as an Emperor, who pays attention to his subordinates and steps up personally, wouldn't it be nice to have such an emperor in the world?

If the emperor he had served in his previous life was like Kishiar, Yuder would have been much happier than when he had been injured while handling unnecessary, dangerous assassination or destruction missions.

'If that were the case…'

Yuder suddenly realized he was stretching his assumptions to an absurd level and stopped his thoughts.

Once one becomes a Duke, regardless of what happens, Kishiar could never ascend to the Emperor's throne. That's why the current Emperor, Keilusa La Orr, didn't raise any heirs.

Moreover, in the end, the one who killed Kishiar in his past life was Yuder himself.

‘Isn’t it amusing that I’m having such thoughts?’

In this life too, Kishiar has already become a Duke. Rather than regretting the parts that couldn’t be changed, he had to prioritize things that could be changed. Yuder decided to stop his overstretching imagination. He was losing his appetite.

“Judging by your expression, it seems this information is not satisfying?”

Then, Enon spoke at the perfect timing. Yuder lowered his head and opened his mouth.

“I think I got some leads on what to investigate next, so it’s okay. For now, this is more than enough.”

“Right now? What are you talking about? You said this would be the end.”

“Well… could it really be?”

Yuder gave a faint smile toward Enon.

“Enon. Now that you know me, given your nature, you’ll inevitably continue to be curious about what I might do. Instead of investigating behind my back, which won’t yield any profit anyway, wouldn’t it be better to openly observe what I’m doing?”

“W-what are you talking about?”

Enon stammered, raising his voice in surprise. Was he planning to investigate Yuder the moment he left?

“Why would I pay attention to you? I don’t plan to believe in such nonsense like you coming back from the future, and I’m even less interested. I helped you once as a repayment for knowing my identity and that’s the end of it! The end!”

“If you say so.”

Even though Enon’s expression clearly contradicted his words, Yuder let out a laugh, set the stack of papers down, and rose from his seat.

“I appreciate your help.”

There was still plenty of time. Soon enough, it would become clear whether Yuder was right or Enon. As he imagined the frown on Enon’s face that would follow him out, Yuder chuckled silently.

“Enon. If something happens or if you want to find me, contact me at the Cavalry’s residence within the Imperial Knights’ grounds.”

“I won’t, okay?”

“Just in case you need it, I’ll leave this here.”

Yuder placed a uniform button, which he had brought with him, on the counter. It was a spare Cavalry stone button with his name on it, capable of replacing a Cavalry members identification.

“Are you listening? I told you I won’t. Take it back! Hey! You rascal!”

Ignoring Enon’s yelling, Yuder opened the door, and the bright sunlight made him squint.

“Hey!”

But before Yuder could step outside, Enon rushed forward and grabbed his sleeve. Yuder intended to tell him that it was okay to throw the button away if he was trying to give it back, but the expression in Enon’s eyes was subtly different from before.

“…You really are a wretched kid. Here, take this. If I let you go and you collapse and die somewhere, it feels like my luck for this

year would be completely ruined.”

Enon forced something into Yuder’s right hand. It didn’t feel like the button. When Yuder opened his hand, he saw a slightly worn red string.

“What is this?”

“Figure it out yourself.”

Despite his words, Enon explained with a grimace.

“It’s something like a charm. Just tie it to something you always carry around.”

“Why are you giving me this?”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake!”

Enon shouted at Yuder’s question, messing up his own hair.

“I don’t know what you were doing before coming here today, but you’re a lot more unstable than when you came before. It seems you’ve calmed yourself with divine power, but if you keep doing that, not even God can save your life. Anyway, it’s better than dying, so take it!”

Bang. The moment his words ended, the door of the pharmacy closed with a loud noise as if it would break. Yuder coughed lightly as the old dust falling from above hit his head.

‘It just looks like a normal string…… what effect could it possibly have.’

—

The returned Cavalry members were still abuzz with tales of the Harvest Festival. No one had noticed when Yuder stepped out for a

moment and then returned. Only a small piece of paper with a message instructing him to come to the Commander's quarters was left on the table of his lodging, prompting Yuder to head straight to the top floor.

"Did you call for me?"

"You're early. I happened to have a cake that came in as a gift. Care to join me?"

Kishiar, who was enjoying his tea and snacks, greeted Yuder with a leisurely wave of his hand. His face was surprisingly neat, as if the late work from the previous night was but a fantasy. Nathan Zuckerman was nowhere to be seen.

Upon seeing Kishiar's face, Yuder recalled the conversation he had with Enon. After a small sigh, he put on an expression as if nothing had happened and took a seat across Kishiar. As if Kishiar had been waiting for him, he pushed a plate of cake toward Yuder.

There were many different kinds of cakes, all of which looked incredibly sweet just by looking at them.

"May I partake in the gift?"

"Don't refuse. They're all sent for the Harvest, and we don't even know who sent them."

In the Orr Empire, it was traditional to exchange food gifts before and after the Harvest Festival. Among commoners, this mostly meant sharing freshly harvested grains and fruits to celebrate the bountiful harvest, but the nobility was different. They used the tradition to flaunt their wealth, competing over who could present the most luxurious and precious food.

Yuder himself, in his previous life, used to receive high-end sweets and rare ingredients from faceless nobles during this time.

He was unable to use them all and had to constantly send them down to the Cavalry's dining hall.

Almost none were sent with pure intentions. Most were sent with a hidden agenda, hoping that their families would be looked upon favorably later. It was quite uncomfortable to eat, and the ones sent to Kishiar were probably no different.

"…Then I won't refuse."

"Just use any fork."

Yuder casually picked up one of the new forks neatly placed next to each plate and started to eat the cake. As expected, it was so sweet that it felt like his tongue would melt.

According to tradition, dignified nobles were supposed to use only one fork per plate of food, which is why there were so many forks. However, Yuder didn't care about such formalities.

Even Kishiar himself said to use any fork, so why should he care?

"Do you like cake? You eat quite well."

"I don't particularly like or dislike it. …You didn't call me here to ask this, did you?"

"Can't I have a little friendly chat with my assistant?"

After saying that, Kishiar went straight to the point.

"You've heard, haven't you? About the matter that has been causing a stir in the Cavalry since this morning."

"If you mean the news of the messenger from the palace, then yes, I've heard."

“That’s right. It’s an extension of the story you saw in the letter last night. Things have gotten a bit complicated.”

The topic Kishiar brought up didn’t stray from the subject Yuder had anticipated before coming. As Yuder silently stuffed a third piece of cake into his mouth, he listened to Kishiar’s words.

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“The increasing number of requests for our Cavalry to participate in events is a good thing. But it seems a bit excessive. Aside from the simple participation requests, there are quite a few requests for maintaining public order, all from important events where foreign diplomats are involved. Moreover, it hasn’t even been a year since the formation of the Cavalry, and they want the whole team to attend the largest party of the year, held at the Imperial Palace. What should I make of this intention?”

“It appears that someone is planning to put us in a position where we cannot refuse,” came Yuder’s response, to which Kishiar lightly nodded in agreement.

“They broke the rule of keeping all related matters confidential until I give a response. Not only among our members, but the information has already spread throughout the capital.”

The autumn harvest festival held in the capital was one of the most significant events in the continent. The Pope himself led the worship and prayer events from an outdoor altar at the main temple of the Sun God. There was a grand parade featuring the Imperial Knights of the palace, specially selected Elite Imperial Troops, renowned Knights, and mages from various provinces. Not to mention countless other major and minor events and competitions held throughout the city for several days.

There was no greater honor than to officially participate in an event that attracted numerous foreign diplomats and tourists.

There was no better opportunity than this to announce the newly formed Cavalry to the whole continent.

It was likely that whoever suddenly proposed this also knew this, hence why they had boldly set the stage.

“Still, you can refuse, can’t you?”

“I could.”

A laugh-tinged answer returned.

“If you, as the Commander, choose to refuse, that would be the end of it.”

“What do you think? Would it be best for me not to be suspicious and reject this overly beneficial offer?”

The fork that was lightly cutting the fifth piece of cake stopped. Yuder, staring into Kishiar’s red eyes full of expectation, realized that this question was the primary reason he had been called.

“…How would I know? I doubt my opinion would be of much help in your grand decision.”

He tried to deflect once, but Kishiar chuckled and shook his head like a boa constrictor.

“Why not? Your unique perspective has always been helpful to me. Giving your opinion on such matters is part of an assistant’s job, so I would appreciate it if you could speak freely.”

‘Well, if it comes to that…’

Yuder opened his mouth as he speared a cherry that resembled Kishiar’s eyes with his fork.

“Actually, haven’t you already made your decision?”

“Hmm?”

“The reason why they set this stage and called us is clear. They want to smear the name of the Cavalry across the entire continent. Even if you refuse, they could still make a mess at the event, but I guess they wouldn’t be satisfied with just that.”

At Yuder’s words, Kishiar gave a satisfied smile, resting his chin elegantly on the hand placed on the armrest.

“So?”

“I don’t know who they are, but you can probably guess.”

Yuder continued, recalling that Kishiar had said the night before that he had a rough idea of who might be behind this.

“If you know who the enemy is, you can predict what they’ll do. Why retreat needlessly when they’re practically handing us a golden opportunity? Isn’t it better to bite the bait and use it to our advantage?”

“Is that so? So you’re suggesting we do just that?”

“If our Commander isn’t afraid of challenges, that’s what I suggest.”

As soon as he finished speaking, a piece of cherry and a chunk of whipped cream cake disappeared into Yuder’s stomach in no time.

“Hahaha. Not afraid of challenges, eh?”

Kishiar broke into a bright smile, tilting his head.

“You, with your unassuming face, are surprisingly good at saying things that put people in a good mood.”

“It’s just my honest opinion.”

“Only you could manage to compliment someone while simultaneously throwing them against the wall.”

Despite his words, Kishiar seemed to be in high spirits.

“In fact, I already accepted those propositions as you suggested. I’ve sent my reply.”

Just as Yuder had thought, Kishiar had already made up his mind.

“Considering that the Ministry of Internal Affairs was desperately avoiding my contacts till now and suddenly came forward on their own, could anything be better? Someone might have thrown this bait, hoping that our Cavalry would become the laughingstock of the continent, but I won’t fall for it, nor will I run away. Even though we’re a new formation and my members are still inexperienced in many ways, that doesn’t mean we’re bound to fail. Don’t you think so?”

At his confident, slow voice, a light shiver ran down Yuder’s back. Yuder answered with sincerity, looking into Kishiar’s glowing red eyes.

“Yes.”

“I’m truly glad that my assistant and I share the same opinion. It’ll be a hectic period for a while, but let’s succeed in a way that will show them. It might even be entertaining to watch.”

Hearing this, Yuder finished the last piece of cake and put his fork down. The sweet aftertaste lingered in his mouth.

“But who is behind all this? Can you tell me now?”

“Why don’t you try guessing with your clever mind?”

“Commander.”

At Yuder’s low calling, Kishiar squinted his eyes in a smile, then opened his mouth.

“A few days ago, the courtiers of the Crown Prince suddenly burst into the palace. I also heard that a courtier with a red belt was seen there yesterday. It seems like the Crown Prince is very interested in this event.”

His answer seemed to come out of nowhere, but it was more than enough for Yuder to deduce the meaning.

‘Crown Prince Katchian La Orr.’

Yuder recalled the face of the young Crown Prince he had briefly met during his recent visit to the Imperial Palace. He already knew who was behind the boy who hid his cold gaze with a painted smile.

‘Did Duke Diarca get involved?’

He wondered if it might be due to the Hartan case where Kiolle was involved, but Yuder shook his head. The bound-by-oath Kiolle couldn’t inform anyone in the house. Besides, if they had been meddling in the palace for a few days, it couldn’t have been because of the recent incident.

“And… do you remember Count Gallon who visited here a few days ago?”

While Yuder was engrossed in his thoughts, Kishiar threw in another piece of information.

Count Gallon. Trying to remember where he had heard that name before, Yuder finally recalled who it was after some time.

‘Ah, the man who had come demanding Kanna’s release.’

After giving him a good scolding and kicking him out, he had completely forgotten about him.

“Yes, I remember.”

Seeing Yuder’s obvious grimace, Kishiar laughed heartily.

“Well, there’s no need to try to remember him again. Thanks to the rumors about him, a lot of people have become interested in the Cavalry unit. There might be people looking for the members related to that incident during the festival, but just pretend not to know. The courier from the palace earlier was subtly trying to confirm the truth of the rumor.”

“Ah… Yes. I understand.”

Yuder responded apprehensively, realizing a beat too late that Kishiar’s words were another hint.

‘So, they just want to see the Cavalry’s power for themselves because of that rumor…’

Then it made sense why Kishiar was so relaxed. No one yet knew how much power the Cavalry held. It was the perfect time to turn the trap they underestimated into an opportunity.

While Yuder was thinking, Kishiar continued smoothly.

“So, from today, we’ll reduce overall training by half and separate people for participation in each event. You, Nathan, and the Deputy Commanders of each Division will need to work hard. But you have one more thing you need to do.”

“Are you talking about the investigation of the Red Stone?”

“There’s that, but there’s one more thing.”

Kishiar nonchalantly announced he was adding another task.

“Did you forget? The request you made before your leave. You asked for the authority related to the members’ training.”

“Oh…”

When Yuder nodded, Kishiar handed over a piece of paper with a seal on it, as if he had been waiting for him.

“I’ve already approved it. Your individual training with Gakane and Kanna was quite impressive. Now that Devran Hartude has returned, isn’t it time to expand that capability to all members?”

Looking at those confident, red eyes, Yuder found himself speechless.

‘Well, I had planned to do it anyway…’

He had done this in his previous life, so doing it twice wouldn’t make a difference. Yuder accepted the approval letter and nodded slightly.

“Understood.”

“Now then…”

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

“Commander. It’s Ever Beck. I’ve come to deliver urgent news.”

Kishiar, who had momentarily turned his gaze to Yuder, commanded, “Come in.” As Ever opened the door and entered, her cheeks were flushed, as if she had run here. Seeing Yuder sitting across from the Commander surprised her, but she quickly regained her composure, approached, and bowed.

“What’s going on?”

“Just now, Jimmy Ocker’s second gender manifestation has begun. As we prepared, I’ve isolated him and came to report.”

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The manifestation of Jimmy’s second gender had been a long time coming. There had been signs for days, so it wasn’t surprising. Kishiar seemed to share the sentiment, nodding his head as he opened his mouth to speak.

“Were there any members affected prior to the isolation? Any other anomalies?”

“Fortunately, the manifestation began while we were discussing training, so other members were not affected. Given the energy I felt alongside the fever from the manifestation, it seems that Jimmy will likely develop into an Alpha like myself. Until the manifestation is complete, I plan to have the Alpha members of the Shin Division take turns caring for him in an isolated room.”

This was the first time that a member of the Shin Division had manifested a second gender. Despite what must have been a significant surprise, Ever’s response was impressively calm.

“We gave him a herbal juice with a fever-reducing effect and applied a wet towel, but do you think this response is sufficient?”

Upon hearing her question, Kishiar, who had been lost in thought, nodded in approval.

“That should be sufficient for now. You handled the sudden situation very well.”

The corners of Ever’s eyes turned slightly red with pleasure.

“Thank you. It’s all thanks to your prior instructions. I merely carried them out.”

“The one who suggested making those arrangements is here, so you should thank Yuder.”

“Yuder, you mean?”

Yuder was taken aback as the conversation suddenly turned towards him. In Ever’s eyes, there was a look of surprise as she turned to look at him.

“…I merely made a suggestion. The fact that it was clearly defined as a rule and law is all thanks to the Commander. There’s no need for that.”

“Haha, it’s nice to see you both passing around credit.”

I don’t like it. Yuder swallowed the words he couldn’t bring himself to say aloud.

“Excuse me, Commander. I also have another matter to discuss…”

Upon finishing her report, Ever trailed off, seemingly aware of Yuder’s presence. She evidently wanted to speak with Kishiar one-on-one. Noticing her hesitation, Yuder quickly rose from his seat to bid his leave.

“I’ll take my leave then.”

“Do that.”

Kishiar waved with a smile. Unaware of Ever’s slightly trembling eyes as she noticed the heap of empty dishes on the table, Yuder left the residence.

As he moved towards the lower ground of the building, avoiding the gaze of the other Cavalry members, his mind was filled only with thoughts related to the news of Jimmy’s manifestation.

‘It was a good decision to set up regulations regarding second gender manifestation in advance.’

In his previous life, there had been quite a few incidents among Cavalry members who suddenly manifested their second gender. Just the thought of not having such troubles this time was refreshing.

‘Come to think of it, wasn’t there not much time left when I manifested in the past?’

He couldn’t remember the exact timing, but he was glad it wasn’t precisely the same as before, since he couldn’t be sure if the timing of manifestation would be the same this time.

‘Wasn’t there a time in the past when awakeners facing a second gender manifestation influenced those with potential around them, leading to a chain of manifestations?’

Those about to, or just after, manifesting a second gender often emitted a unique energy that could be felt with the senses, even if it wasn’t visible.

In the case of Jimmy, he had only experienced slight fevers, but it never hurt to be cautious in case of an unknown occurrence. Yuder contemplated spreading the word in advance in case his power erupted suddenly.

‘With the rules in place and those around me on guard, I’ll be prepared even if my powers erupt abruptly like before. Jimmy’s precedent would mean there will be less surprise.’

This time, absolutely, he would prevent any situation where he was alone with Alpha before his powers erupted. Clenching his fist lightly, Yuder made a firm resolution.

—

As Kishiar had mentioned, the Red Stone was stored in a spacious room set up beneath the Cavalry building. When he knocked on the entrance that appeared to be nothing more than an ordinary warehouse, a small hole just wide enough for a pair of eyes to peek through opened in no time.

“Ah, it’s you!”

Despite his lack of self-introduction, the person inside recognized Yuder immediately and opened the door for her.

“I’ve been looking forward to seeing you again… Uh, yes, my name. You remember it, right?”

“Of course. You’re Alik Pelgin.”

Upon Yuder’s succinct answer, Alik Pelgin, the apprentice of the old mage, smiled brightly.

“That’s right. I’m relieved. I thought you might have forgotten me, as our first encounter was so brief… Just like the first time we met….”

Seeing his eyes cloud over as if recalling something, it seemed the incident of Yuder forgetting the name of Kiolle da Diarca at their first meeting was deeply imprinted in his mind. Yuder turned his gaze towards the expansive space behind the mage, rather than responding.

Other than massive pillars placed here and there to support the building, the place was completely empty.

However, a transparent box was visible on a table far away, and a hefty aura was barely leaking out from that direction, making his fingertips tingle slightly. It seemed that the Red Stone was stored there.

“Is the stone currently in that box?”

“Ah, yes. As expected, you spotted it right away. Follow me. I’ll show you.”

Yuder started walking behind Alik. As the distance shortened, he could feel the energy emitted by the Red Stone intensifying through his skin.

Yet, strangely, Yuder noticed that the energy didn’t seem as provocative and heavy as before.

‘What is this?’

“Do you see those magic stones on the ceiling?”

Alik opened his mouth as if noticing Yuder’s puzzled expression.

“The energy emanating from the Red Stone was so strong that as soon as my master and I arrived here, we had to first create a barrier. We spent dozens of precious stones to build a seven-layer barrier, which was just barely enough to weaken it to this level. My master still seems to think further reinforcement is needed. How do you feel? Is the air breathable?”

Only then did Yuder notice the magic stones stuck all around the high ceiling. Upon closer inspection, he could make out complicated magic circles drawn faintly.

“…Yes. It’s much better.”

“Miss Kanna also said the same. I’m glad it seems to be effective.”

Alik grinned, looking rather proud, but Yuder didn’t return the smile.

“By the way… Where did Master Yulman go?”

“Master had briefly gone up to our quarters. He’ll be back soon. Ah, wait a moment. Please, stop there.”

Alik interrupted, abruptly blocking Yuder’s path.

“We’ve set up a camp here. From here, it just looks like an empty space, but if we do this… Ha ha.”

As Alik complicatedly twirled and waved his hand, the once empty space started to blur and the scenery changed. The distant Red Stone remained in view, but suddenly before Yuder appeared two sleeping bags that hadn’t been there before, a table, three chairs, and a small magic stone stove burning brightly.

“Master couldn’t be bothered to go back to the quarters, so he left these here.”

“Shouldn’t we inform the Commander and move proper furniture here?”

Alik scratched his head at Yuder’s serious question.

“No, no, it’s alright. This is more than enough for us. Master dislikes complicated things, and he’s accustomed to living this way while conducting research… Ha ha…”

A subtle hint of struggle was noticeable on Alik’s laughing face, as if he was a disciple catering to a demanding master.

“Actually, even though we’ve set up camp here, I can’t proceed further without Master. When Master arrives, would you like to observe more closely with us? Or…”

“Stay here. I’ll go take a look alone.”

What was important wasn’t to observe the stone, but to understand how much the mages had deciphered from the stone

and what kind of investigation they were going to conduct.

Leaving Alik behind, Yuder began to stride towards the Red Stone. Thanks to the magic stones set up, he could approach much closer than before.

The Red Stone, delicately placed on a cushion inside a transparent box, hadn't changed since he last saw it. However, it seemed like the old mage had attempted to set up something as several magic stones were scattered around the box.

'It seems there hasn't been much progress yet.'

"Oh, our guest has arrived."

Yuder, who had been observing the stone, turned his head at the voice behind him. The elder magician of the Pearl Tower, Thais Yulman, greeted him with a smiling face.

"Sir Yuder. It's been a while."

"It has indeed, Yulman. Just call me Yuder."

In previous meetings, Kishiar had been present, and so formal titles were used. But now, as they would be seeing each other more frequently, there was no need for such formality. The old mage readily accepted Yuder's suggestion.

"Right."

The old mage, sporting a splendid white beard, was wearing an ordinary grey robe unlike what you'd expect from an elder of the Pearl Tower, but his eyes twinkled with youthful vigor. He was a stark contrast to his disciple, who seemed half weary.

"Did you come to see the stone?"

"No, I wanted to hear about the progress of the investigation."

“Ah, I see.”

Thais Yulman nodded, looking back at the Red Stone and wrinkling the bridge of his nose slightly.

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“Well, as you can see, it’s still nothing impressive,” the old master remarked, “We’ve set up a defensive formation, barely enough to inspect the situation. It seems we’ll need at least another day to establish a proper one. If only my apprentice had created the formation a bit quicker, we could’ve progressed further by now. Tsk.”

“Master, do you wish to kill me? There are only a few people across the continent who can finish a defensive formation faster than I!” Alik cried out in a gloomy tone from afar. But neither Thais nor Yuder paid much attention to his words.

“I see. I heard you’ve had some conversation with Kanna.”

“Oh, that young woman with astounding abilities.”

A delighted smile spread across Thais’s face.

“She was very enthusiastic and friendly. Thanks to the stories shared by Kanna, I was able to contemplate on how to approach the Red Stone.”

Of course, nothing was definitively decided yet, Thais added. Yet, to Yuder, his words sounded like great news.

“Is that so?”

“Indeed. Care to listen?”

Yuder followed Thais back to the spot with chairs and a table, where Alik had already prepared a pot of tea.

“Have some. It’s tea made from flowers I personally harvested and dried.”

“You’ve plucked it from the garden behind the Pearl Tower, haven’t you? As they’re grown by the mages for research, they may at least have the best effect in boosting energy, if nothing else.”

The flower, floating on the hot water, seemed almost alive. He didn’t know about the effects, but the extraordinarily fresh and cool scent washed away the lingering sweetness of the cake he had at Kishiar’s quarters.

“How is it? Isn’t the fragrance pleasant?”

“Yes, it’s delightful.”

Hearing Yuder’s response, Thais twirled his swollen fingers around the invisible tea cup and continued.

“Pouring hot water over dried flowers to experience such vivacity and intense aroma again, it’s truly a marvel.”

“…”

“Each time I see this, I’m reminded of the immense potential and power dormant within a tiny, withered flower. That’s why I adore this tea. The effects of this tea, which I first researched 54 years ago…..”

He had promised to discuss how to approach the Red Stone, but the old mage began a new tale.

“My research on the origin of magic, which started there…..”

Alik, too, was at a loss when the idle talk, starting from the tea, eventually led to the historical research of Thais Yulman. Despite the irritating situation, Yuder didn’t rush him. Seeing Yuder listening to his words patiently, without any change in expression, a faint smile flashed across Thais Yulman’s face, only to disappear shortly.

“Oh dear, I apologize. I got carried away with a different topic instead of getting to the main point. Weren’t you bored?”

“Not at all.”

Sitting quietly in front of someone who only talked about his interests was not a difficult task for Yuder, who had been dragged to various meetings in his previous life that didn’t suit his personality.

‘And besides, Thais Yulman does not seem to be sharing these stories for no reason.’

“Truthfully, I had a specific reason for telling these stories.”

‘Just as I thought.’

Yuder felt a sense of vindication, taking another sip from his cup of tea.

“You guys were the ones who retrieved the Red Stone, and I’m sure you’re already aware, but contrary to its exterior, the stone is brimming with dormant power, isn’t it? I thought maybe we could apply the method used in making this flower tea to access that power.”

Access the stone in the same way as making tea? Yuder looked at his companion’s face for a moment before responding.

“Do you plan on pouring some water on it?”

“Ha ha ha. Close, but not quite water.”

At Yuder’s words, Thais chuckled as though amused, stroking his beard as he continued the conversation.

“When I asked Kanna, she mentioned… if an Awakener’s power like you guys touches the stone, it triggers an explosion, right?”

Upon hearing this, Yuder quickly realized what the old mage was thinking.

“Do you plan on forcibly triggering all the remaining power within the Red Stone to erupt and discharge?”

“That’s right.”

“That’s dangerous.”

The response didn’t need a second thought.

“The power of the stone is of a different dimension than any other power we’ve encountered so far. A mere touch can have lethal consequences. And what do you plan to do with the released power?”

Yuder himself had suffered damage from accidentally touching the power of the Red Stone, so there was no need to elaborate on its lethal danger.

“Didn’t I just mention that the area I’ve been consistently studying for a long time has to do with the origin and essence of magic?”

“The power of magic and the Red Stone are completely different.”

“But what if they’re not so different?”

Thais responded leisurely, flashing a smile.

“Look here, Yuder. Our magic-created barrier is firmly blocking the power of the Red Stone, right? That means, although the two powers might differ, they can influence each other. If we can block it, theoretically, it should be possible to confine the discharged power.”

Yuder furrowed his brow, momentarily at a loss for words. It was true that the seven-layer barrier he and his disciple had cast was currently blocking the energy emitted by the Red Stone. However,

naturally emitted energy and exploding energy couldn’t possibly be the same.

“Even if that’s true… If multiple layers only manage to block this much, it’s impossible to stop the exploding power. Let alone confining it, I can’t even imagine it.”

“I think it would be possible to confine the discharged power within a certain space if we significantly reinforce the barrier we have now. After that, we would need to transfer it using a medium.”

“Transfer it?”

“Yes. Like a magic tool. Yuder, have you heard about magic tools?”

As Yuder nodded, Thais continued, as if he had expected as much.

“The principle of making a magic tool is to preserve the form of magic power at the moment of its manifestation using a medium. How well it can be confined depends on the quality of the medium and the skill of the mage making the tool, but the principle itself is simple. That’s what I want to try.”

If making magic tools was as simple as Thais suggested, the mages who knew how to create them wouldn’t be treated as such rarities. However, Thais was talking about it as if it was an easy task.

“You make it sound so simple.”

“In a sense, it might be easier than creating a magic tool, since we’re trying to contain just the pure energy filling a space, not preserving a specific form of magic energy.”

His explanation was complicated, but frankly, it was a rather intriguing proposition. If, as Thais had suggested, they could

separate the energy from the Red Stone, they could possess the Stone and its energy separately.

The Stone, devoid of energy, would no longer be dangerous, and they could have Kanna examine it. If they had the mages investigate the energy stored in a medium, it couldn't be better.

When he thought that far, Yuder suddenly remembered something and froze with a stiff expression.

'…Wait. How was it in my previous life?'

In his previous life, the Red Stone that headed to the Pearl Tower had lost its power afterward and returned as the 'World Sphere'. Yuder had long been puzzled about where the power that the World Sphere originally had went, but due to the collapse of the Pearl Tower and the loss of all relevant personnel and information, he couldn't find the answer until his death.

The one who examined the Red Stone headed for the Pearl Tower in his previous life was likely Thais Yulman, just like now. In that case, he must have thought of the same solution back then.

'And… it must have been successful. Otherwise, the World Sphere that returned couldn't have been such an empty shell. If he had succeeded in separating the Red Stone and the energy inside it, where did the separated energy go? Who used it, and for what purpose? Keilusa La Orr died before the World Sphere returned… How about Kishiar? Did he retire before the World Sphere returned? Did Emperor Katchian know about it?'

Or perhaps, the Pearl Tower side may have hidden the separated energy, or it might have been lost Trying to recall faint memories, he got a headache.

Yuder felt a chill down his spine and gritted his teeth. Seeing him suddenly stop talking and become cold, Thais Yulman tilted his head

as if he found it strange.

“Does my idea seem that reckless to you? Your expression doesn’t look good.”

“…No.”

Right. What did it matter what happened in the past? The Red Stone and Thais Yulman were both here now, so all they had to do was find new answers.

‘Anyway, one thing I can be sure of. I don’t have to worry about Thais Yulman’s hypothesis failing.’

Regaining his composure, Yuder spoke.

“Your words certainly seem reasonable, Yulman. But even if we can separate and contain the power… Do we have a medium that can contain such immense power?”

Seeing that his sudden change in mood was due to the matter of the medium, Thais didn’t question it further.

“We’ll have to test that from now on. I’ll tell you a few things that are known as the strongest mediums. It would be great if you could tell the Duke about this. He should be able to help with that, shouldn’t he?”

“Understood. What are they?”

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“A piece of the ancient dragon’s heart, powder of an ancient fairy, top-grade Eucalractium.”

Yuder didn’t know much about the components of magic tools or the like, but he did know that the three ingredients Thais mentioned were all incredibly rare and valuable. Given the rarity of these items, it was reasonable that Thais couldn’t procure them on his own and had to request help from Kishiar.

“Are those the only three items?”

“For now, yes.”

“Understood. I’ll pass this onto the Commander. Also, you might need magic stones for setting up the defensive formation. I’ll mention that as well.”

At Yuder’s words, Thais’s pupil, Alik, wore an expression of gratitude.

“Oh, thank you for considering that too. The truth is, we were running low on magic stones.”

“If you find anything lacking, please let either me or Kanna know. Ah, was there any contact from the Pearl Tower?”

“We’re fine. They still think we’re in the Imperial Palace. Even if they find out we’re here, given the Master’s character, it won’t be a major issue…”

“Ahem, Alik. You’re unusually talkative today.”

At his Master’s pointed words, Alik stiffened his shoulders.

‘So, that means the other mages from the Pearl Tower are not as interested in the study of the Red Stones as Thais Yulman.’

It was fortunate. Emperor Keilusa had given them only a month to investigate the Red Stones, and several days had already passed. There was no time to delay. Any potential distractions had to be completely ruled out.

‘Still… I must ensure their safety.’

Yuder decided he needed to caution them about the dangers of the stone through Kanna as well, to prevent any accidents from mages mishandling the Red Stone. With this thought, he exited the underground.

—

Of the seven walls existing in the capital, the 1st and 2nd walls were the territory of the Imperial Palace. As such, the area accessible to ordinary people truly started from the 3rd wall. However, even prestigious noble families often resided beyond the 4th wall. Entering within the 3rd wall was not an easy task.

Of course, the main house of the Apeto Dukedom, one of the most traditional and prestigious families maintained from the beginning of the empire, was naturally located within the 3rd wall.

Among all the beautiful buildings erected within the 3rd wall, it was the most sacred and graceful. However, that day, it was filled with a precarious atmosphere, as if one was treading on thin ice.

The reason was simple. Lenore Shand Apeto, the second son known for his exceptionally cold nature, was in a very foul mood.

“There’s no one at the stronghold, not even any trace of any left behind object or sign… Did they think that I would grant them more time because of such a shoddy report?”

“Of course not, sir.”

The servant knelt before Lenore, shivering in fear. He didn’t need to look up to feel the icy anger pouring down from above.

Unlike the first son, Aishes, who, bearing the title of heir, didn’t need to concern himself with trivial matters, the second son, Lenore, handled many practical affairs. If he wanted to increase his chances, even by a small margin, of surpassing Aishes in the Duke of Apeto’s eyes, his only way was to produce good results in his tasks without making mistakes.

Hence, Lenore had been most focused on supporting ‘research’ related to the Awakeners these days. Since the First Prince didn’t express much interest in this field, Lenore saw it as an excellent opportunity to yield results.

For research, the consistent supply of Awakeners to be used as subjects was of utmost importance, and the Eastern base, which had done this job most competently until now, had suddenly lost contact a few days ago. Lenore sent nearby subordinates to investigate, but the only reports that returned conveyed meaningless information: the base was already emptied out, with no clue as to where its inhabitants had gone.

There were only two pieces of information that could be obtained for him. One, the oath of the Eastern base’s Warden kept at the headquarters had been stained in red, indicating he had failed to keep the ‘secret’ and had likely died. And the other, an unfathomable rumor that a gigantic column of fire had suddenly risen and disappeared around the time the contact with the Eastern base was cut off.

‘Fire. The last report from the Eastern base said they had captured an Awakener from the Cavalry. His ability was fire, if I remember correctly.’

There were many things Lenore had wished to investigate upon bringing the Cavalry's Awakener here, but everything had gone into disarray with the disappearance of the base itself. Considering that Duke Peletta, the Cavalry Commander, had been silent up till now, it seemed doubtful whether the Eastern base had really captured a member of the Cavalry.

The fact that secrets about the ongoing research at Apeto had been leaked was nothing short of an emergency. There must have been a colossal incident there, and yet it was unbelievable that nothing remained at the scene.

Even more disturbing was the fact that, according to the reports, some time had passed since the site was thoroughly cleaned up, but no suspicious movements had been felt around Apeto family.

'If only someone who caused this mess had threatened us, it would've been easier to deal with.'

The fact that Lenore couldn't identify who leaked the secret was extremely unsettling. If Duke Apeto found out about this, not only would he immediately take back all the tasks he had entrusted to Lenore, but he would also send Lenore far away without hesitation.

"The fact that everything disappeared without a trace means that either the others there planned to kill the Warden and run away, or they were caught somewhere without even having time to escape. What about the possibility that the Diarca family noticed something and took action?"

The Diarca family was the most likely suspect for causing this incident. The East was originally their territory, and if they found an intruder, they would have certainly not let them live. It wouldn't be surprising if they figured out that Apeto was involved in the process.

'But if that was the case, they wouldn't have remained silent till now. If they had that good information, they would either show signs

of starting research like us, or give us some hint.’

“The possibility is indeed… plausible.”

The servant, who had no clue about Lenore’s thoughts, simply stammered and wrung his hands.

“The investigators said that the youngest prince of the Diarca family happened to be training the knight squad nearby a few days ago. Then, is there not a possibility that our people came across them during their training?”

“If you’re talking about Diarca’s youngest, do you mean Kiolle da Diarca?”

Upon mentioning Kiolle’s name, Lenore’s expression scrunched up, failing to conceal his disdain.

“Of all people, that fool who thinks he became an Imperial Knight because of his superior skills is not very capable. If he were smart enough to carry out such a bold action without leaving a trace, he would have already earned at least one favor from the Diarca family.”

“I apologize if my inadequacies upset your mood, sir.”

Immediately, the servant prostrated himself on the ground, his forehead pressing against the floor.

“Enough. Any other peculiarities?”

“…”

“Speak up, anything will do. If you can’t prove your worth here, there will be no future for you.”

At the chilling threat, the servant trembled and desperately tried to recall the information he’d exchanged while in contact with the Eastern base. He was so terrified that everything he knew seemed to

disappear from his mind, but with great effort, a small piece of information popped up.

“The, the people at the Eastern base said they had a few collaborators in the nearby village. Wouldn’t we be able to obtain information related to the incident if we find those collaborators?”

“Collaborators.”

The Apeto family’s ‘bases’ scattered across the continent did a lot of work, but their most important task was to undermine the powers that followed other aristocratic families. One of the most effective methods was to recruit dissatisfied young nobles, with issues of succession or inheritance, as collaborators.

“I wonder how much they really know… but alright. It’s better than not trying. Along with monitoring the movements of the Diarca family, find and investigate these collaborators, then report back.”

“Yes, sir!”

Lenore rose from his seat and headed towards the annex behind the main mansion. The annex had a prison in the basement, and it felt strange to see priests in white robes moving around amidst the horrifying scene where groans of pain echoed.

Among the priests, one with the most luxurious holy symbol necklace around his neck turned to Lenore and greeted him immediately.

“Welcome, second young master.”

“How is the research going, uncle?”

The middle-aged priest referred to as ‘uncle’ by Lenore was Beltrail Shand Apeto, one of the illegitimate siblings of the current Duke of Apeto. He had an uncanny resemblance to the duke,

suggesting undeniable kinship. Beltrail had joined the Sun God temple at a young age and had risen to the position of one of the twelve senior priests, directly under the Pope.

Outwardly, he seemed utterly incorruptible, but the inner contents didn't align with his appearance. The priest smiled gently and patted Lenore's shoulder.

"As always. We are simply observing the will of God."

God's will. Amid the chorus of agonized groans, it was an eerily absurd phrase to hear, but no one challenged him on it.

"None of the ones you sent last time who had children survived. It seems certain that there are more complicated conditions necessary for them to reproduce than simply waiting for their mating season."

"Is that so? How is the plan to observe their changes coming along?"

At Lenore's question, Beltrail shook his head.

"It seems we need to gather more Awakeners who originally had power. Wouldn't the be differences between an Awakener Priest and an Awakener Mage? It would be best if we could find an Awakener Knight who can use aura, but that might be quite challenging."

The news was negative; they still hadn't obtained clear results. But Lenore couldn't be angry at his uncle, so he simply let out a long sigh.

'It's been over a year since we started this research, and we still haven't achieved any significant results. If Aishes knew about this, he would double over with laughter.'

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The First Prince Aishes had long since washed his hands of the research, arguing that it would yield no useful information. In contrast, Lenore invested heavily in this study. It was a research that he started with faith in the power of his uncle, who had been studying the Awakeners ever since they first appeared.

If through this research he could find a clue to resolve the blood-related issue that had been plaguing his family for so long, or even discover information that could serve as a weakness for the Duke of Peletta, who had been annoying everyone since his awakening, Aishes' position as the successor would be shaken in an instant.

Lenore had no doubt that he would be a far superior successor than a frail Aishes who arrogantly relied solely on being born first.

However, the research had been fruitless for over a year, and to add insult to injury, the Warden of the Eastern base, who had been supplying the Awakeners, had died. As if that wasn't enough, the entire base had disappeared without a trace. The more he thought about it, the more of a headache it was. The Warden had been a good communicator, and Lenore had taken a liking to him.

"Have you seen my father? Did… did he say anything?" Lenore asked.

Beltrail shook his head at Lenore's question.

"I saw him a little while ago, but he said there's no need to report if there's no progress."

It was a rather bad sign that the Duke, who had been interested and even provided a place when Lenore first proposed this research a year ago, said that. Lenore looked around with a forced smile.

“I see. Well, father is busy these days, so it can’t be helped. I will see if I can bring more Awakeners, either Knights or Mages, for uncle.”

“How did the situation with the Awakener from the Cavalry you mentioned last time turn out?” Beltrail asked, as if he suddenly remembered.

Feeling as if his sore spot had been prodded again, Lenore hid his irritation behind a forced smile and shook his head.

“Well… there seems to have been some misunderstanding. It’s not like an Awakener from the Cavalry can be easily captured.”

“I see. That’s unfortunate.”

Genuine disappointment crossed Beltrail’s eyes. It was an unusual expression for someone who always maintained a gentle demeanor.

“It seems you had quite high hopes. I’m sorry for not meeting your expectations.”

“Duke Peletta is one of the first Awakeners and the first confirmed second gender. I thought those handpicked by him must be special in some way. Please bring them if you ever get a chance.”

Lenore knew that Kishiar La Orr was one of the early Awakeners, but he had never heard of the latter part. Watching his uncle’s research over the past year, he had thought he understood the Awakeners and the second gender quite well. Unable to hide his surprise, he responded.

“Is that so? I wasn’t aware that Duke Peletta had manifested a second gender.”

“It was almost simultaneous with his awakening, as far as I understand. That’s what the Temple of the Sun God confirmed. Well, isn’t it only natural?”

Natural. Lenore instantly understood what that meant.

“I see. An Imperial family member worthy of the title of Duke… Then, what gender is the Duke of Peletta?”

“What do you think?”

Beltreil asked with a smile, clearly enjoying himself.

“I’m not sure. Didn’t uncle say it’s difficult to distinguish just by appearance? But I would prefer it if it were the Omega.”

“Why is that?”

“Wouldn’t it be nice if God granted at least the mercy of nurturing an imperial heir directly to someone who is destined not to have children? Especially considering how blessed he is.”

The comment was filled with unmistakable sarcasm. And yet, hearing a remark that could get him dragged away for insulting an Imperial family member, Beltreil did nothing but smile softly, not rebuking his nephew.

“Unfortunately, he is an Alpha.”

“I see. That’s a shame.”

Lenore replied indifferently in a voice that was not sorry at all, then turned away.

“Then, I’ll take my leave now. If you need anything, please send a message through the servant at any time.”

“Understood. May the Light’s blessing be with you.”

Emerging from the underground dungeon, Lenore began to walk toward the main mansion through the corridor. Several servants followed him politely. However, before he completely left the annex, a sound of something breaking along with a beast-like roar echoed from somewhere.

“What was that sound?”

One of the servants hurriedly ran off at the question asked by the second prince, who had stopped walking with an unpleasant expression. He returned shortly and reported the identity of the sound they had just heard.

“It’s said to be that Awakener brat you ordered to be imprisoned last time. He’s still not behaving, so he’s still being confined, but as soon as he regains consciousness, he causes such a ruckus.”

“You mean the one I had imprisoned last time… are you talking about that brat who was Revlin’s escort?”

“Yes, that’s right. He’s reportedly screaming to see Prince Revlin again.”

“It’s surprising that the ignorant fool is still alive.”

To be honest, Lenore had forgotten until just now that he had given such an order. However, as he heard the servant’s story, the unpleasant feeling he had felt at that time came back to him.

“Prince Revlin comes every day to beg not to harm him, so we can’t even flog him. We’re just drugging his food to keep him quiet.”

“Revlin? But why wasn’t I informed?”

“I apologize! …”

As Lenore furrowed his brow, the servants all flinched in fear and bowed deeply. For them, meeting the gaze of the second prince when he was in a bad mood meant death.

‘What a bunch of idiots. They’re all useless.’

Lenore looked down at the back of the servants’ heads and imagined stabbing them all to death. If he did that, no one would say a word. Such things had happened plenty of times before.

But he refrained because he still remembered how Aishes had reported him to the duke when he had killed a few servants last time, and he had been reprimanded. It was not good to give more reasons in a situation where his brutality was already regarded as his weakness.

“Never mind. If Revlin had forced me not to tell, then you couldn’t help it. But you must not forget that I am your master.”

The servants trembled in uncertainty at Lenore’s cold voice. Lenore turned his head towards the inside of the annex where the beastly screams had subsided.

“The one we’ve locked up Right. Starve him for a week, not even a drop of water, and if he still doesn’t quiet down, send him to the dungeon. Inform my uncle he can use him however he pleases.”

“Understood.”

“Also, Revlin Shand Apeto is to be prohibited from approaching this annex. He disregards the dignity of the Apeto, plays with the likes of hired hands, and blatantly ignores my orders, showing no fear. If he disobeys again, bring it directly to me.”

Having said that, Lenore exited the annex without a backward glance. The servants straightened their bent backs and exchanged terror-filled glances a good while after he’d disappeared.

“…That’s what he said, sir. Therefore, you must never come here. If he finds out, we will all die.”

“What?”

Not long after, a small shadow that tried to sneak in through the back door of the annex was stopped by a servant’s hand. The figure, his face hidden by a large hat attached to his cloak, was none other than Revlin Shand Apeto, the youngest of Duke Apeto and the younger brother of Lenore Shand Apeto.

“That’s nonsense. You know, Phil. If I don’t go, he will truly die.”

“You really can’t, sir. Don’t you know the temper of Second Prince?”

After a few rounds of squabble, the white hand removed the hat from his face. He was a doll-like pretty boy that attracted attention at first glance.

Seeing the golden eyes soaked with tears and anger under the disheveled red hair, the old servant who blocked Revlin sighed. But still, he couldn’t let him in. For the sake of the young prince, for his own life, this was the best choice.

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“Damn.”

Revlin, spitting out a curse unfitting of his pretty face, cast his gaze to the ground. The thought of what could be happening underneath this ground sent shivers down his spine.

“Okay, I won’t go in. Was there any other news? If Lenore was here, he surely must have had a talk with uncle.”

“Nothing in particular. Ah, but”

The old servant, who followed Lenore to the dungeon, scratched his face as he racked his memory.

“The two of them were talking about Duke Peletta.”

“Duke Peletta? Did they discuss the Cavalry?”

Revlin hastily raised his voice to ask.

“Yes, I believe I heard such a name. They tried to bring someone from there but failed, and they were saying it’s a shame.”

Revlin’s expression sunk into thought for a moment before he nodded, handing the servant a gold coin.

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“Right. Thanks for telling me. Take this.”

“Oh, you shouldn’t have….”

“It’s not just a handout. You have to hide it well so that he doesn’t notice.”

“That won’t be as easy as you think, sir.”

Even as the servant spoke those words, he didn’t refuse the money. Revlin gazed upwards at a window in a room on the third floor of the annex, the light completely concealed by thick curtains, and murmured a name under his breath.

“….Nion.”

His lips quivered merely at uttering the name. The boy let out a long breath, clenching his fists tightly.

“The Harvest Festival will start soon. When it does, I’ll be free from my close guard. I’ll be able to move without his watchful eyes… Just hold on a little longer…”

“Sir, you must leave now. The shift change is about to end and someone will come.”

Turning around, the old servant gestured sternly. Revlin flipped his hat back on and quickly turned away. The area behind the annex became silent as if nobody had ever been there.

—

The first event of the Harvest Festival, always held in the capital, was the ‘Grand Parade’.

The Grand Parade was a massive procession circling the entire capital, involving the Imperial Knights, Imperial Mages, specially selected Elite Imperial Troops, and renowned Knightly Orders from various regions, along with other famous figures from across the continent.

To be able to participate in the parade, an event that brought together the largest crowds and was eagerly anticipated, was a great honor that could be boasted of for generations.

This year, the news that the Cavalry led by the specially invited Duke Kishiar La Orr of Pelleta would participate in the parade had surprised many, and depending on their interests, some were hoping for the Cavalry’s success and others for its failure.

“I can’t believe… I’m here to participate in the parade.”

Yuder looked at Kanna, who was mumbling next to him. She stood proudly at the front of about ten members of the Cavalry. Despite her band being slightly skewed, indicating her position as the Deputy Commander, she seemed oblivious to it, appearing half-dazed.

“I’m nervous. Despite all the practice, I feel like my hands and feet are shaking now that I’m really here. What if I fall while walking? What if I make a mistake and the Cavalry becomes a laughing stock….”

“Don’t worry. Have you forgotten?”

Yuder nonchalantly spoke as he straightened her band.

“The moment we start walking, we will create a wind barrier so that even if we try to fall, we won’t be able to.”

“Ah, right. I… I forgot.”

Kanna nodded endlessly, her mouth gaping as if she had just remembered.

Kanna wasn’t the only member who was worried about falling during the parade. Therefore, Kishiar and Yuder decided to call in a member of the Sul Division with wind power, who has a particularly calm personality, to wrap the members’ legs in wind throughout the parade.

In truth, Kishiar had some doubts about the effectiveness of this, but Yuder’s past experiences assured him that the method had certainly worked.

‘It’s a win if it doesn’t get worse.’ Wind, for instance, may not be practically helpful, but the stability that it offers can soothe the members’ hearts. It was all about keeping a calm mind.

‘This was a method I used when I first became the Commander in my previous life… Well, it worked well back then.’

However, the difference was that back then, Yuder was the one who used the wind, and this time, it wasn’t. All Yuder hoped for was that the member who decided to use the power of the wind would do their job properly.

“Yuder, Kanna!”

Just as he was gently patting the slightly calmed down Kanna’s back, a bright voice came from behind him. A bit behind the main row where the Shin Division had gathered, standing right next to the other members, was Jimmy, his eyes sparkling with a smile.

“You’re really, really cool today!”

Jimmy, who had manifested his second gender, stood up, dusting himself off, on the third day. The boy who had completed his manifestation was now a perfect Alpha. Although many were worried about his manifestation at such a young age, Jimmy rather enjoyed it.

In the few days of preparing for the Harvest Festival, Yuder, who was so busy that he couldn't even get proper sleep, felt like he was finally seeing Jimmy's face properly today.

'Somehow… it doesn't feel like it's just me. Hasn't he grown a bit in the meantime? Hasn't his uniform sleeve gotten a bit short? When we get back, I'll have to get it mended right away.'

In preparation for today's march, all members had dressed up smartly in their black uniforms. Those who had requested personal weapons all had new weapons bestowed in the name of Kishiar. The members, freed from the predicament of having to carry worn-out training weapons, had faces full of excitement and tension.

Yuder, seeing the beautiful high-quality scabbard hanging around Jimmy's waist, gave a faint smile. In fact, a very similar sword was hanging around Yuder's own waist. It had been personally bestowed upon him by Kishiar the night before.

However, unlike the other members' swords made of well-refined high-grade iron, Yuder's was a little special. That's because it was a sword made from Eucalractium, one of the materials that Thais Yulman, the Elder Mage of the Pearl Tower, had requested from Kishiar a while ago, to use as a medium to contain the power of the Red Stone.

Eucalractium, a rare mineral occasionally discovered in unexpected places, was similar to iron but became incomparably hard when refined. Its ability to accept magic power was also excellent, so it was often used as a material for magic tools rather

than swords. Nevertheless, it was clear that it was one of the best materials for making swords.

There’s no need to give me such a good sword.

As long as it doesn’t look any different from what the other members got, it’s fine. The average person wouldn’t recognize it. Surely, you don’t expect my assistant to carry a training sword even during the parade, do you?

Yuder received the sword from Kishiar with a mix of emotions. On the inside of the scabbard, painted black to avoid drawing the enemy’s attention, was an ancient language drawn beautifully in white, blessing and wishing for martial luck. As Yuder stared at it, Kishiar opened his mouth with a soft smile.

Do you see the empty slot inside the scabbard?

Ah… yes.

Just as he said, there was a strange groove at the very bottom of the white motif that could be felt when touched by a finger.

Where’s the gemstone I detached from the divine sword before?

It’s here as well.

Kishiar’s eyes narrowed slightly at the sight of Yuder pulling out a red gemstone from the pocket of his uniform. His demeanor seemed to imply that he expected this.

What are you going to do if you drop it while carrying it around like that?

I had no other way but to keep it by my side at all times. I have yet to lose it, isn’t that okay?

It’s not okay. That’s why I ordered to make a slot in the scabbard so that you can fit it in. Now, attach it.

Only then did Yuder realize what role the groove inside the scabbard was intended to play, and he was surprised. When he carefully inserted the red gemstone, it fit perfectly, as if it was made for it from the beginning.

Now it’s complete.

Indeed, the existence of the red gemstone meant Yuder’s sword was fully completed. Although the gemstone was placed where it would not be noticeable unless one paid close attention, Yuder was satisfied with it. He preferred it this way, as being too conspicuous could cause dissatisfaction among the other members.

Thank you.

You’ve been reducing your sleep for days, running around preparing for the festival. To be honest, I wanted to give you something better, but that was the best I could do on short notice.

This is more than enough.

I thought you would say that.

Kishiar sighed, shaking his head slightly, and smiled.

…

Yuder, who was absentmindedly fiddling with the sword hilt while reminiscing about what had happened last night, glanced at Kishiar, who was chatting with the Imperial Knight Commander and the Chief Imperial Mage up ahead.

Wearing white gloves embroidered with gold thread and a flawless golden hair stylishly swept back to reveal a smooth

forehead, he looked as if he were born for this day.

His tall stature stood out from a distance, and he wore a dazzling white uniform brighter than ever. Just watching him gave one a dizzying sensation. Indeed, many people were sneaking glances at Kishiar and losing their wits.

He was as beautiful as he appeared, but like Yuder, he had hardly slept and had been preparing for today. While his fatigue didn't show like it did under Yuder's eyes, he must have been quite tired.

Yuder, Kanna. You're here.

Gakane.

Just then, another tall young man entered Yuder's field of vision, obscuring Kishiar. Gakane, looking neater than usual with his red hair tied back with a black silk ribbon, had a brilliant aura about him, reminiscent of a prince from an old tale.

Wow, Gakane. You look like a real noble lord now.

As Kanna openly admired his appearance, Gakane, who was indeed from a distinguished family of nobility since birth, gave a perplexed smile and scratched his head.

Ha-ha. Is that a compliment?

Of course!

At Kanna's playful words, Gakane, smiling, turned to Yuder. His gaze drifted momentarily toward Yuder's hand, covered by a black glove, then quickly returned as if nothing happened.

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Chapter 117

“Yuder, you worked hard until late last night, didn’t you? How are you feeling? You look a bit tired.”

“I’m fine.”

“Is that a new sword you have? Quite impressive. The red string tied to the handle, did the Commander give it to you?”

In fact, Yuder had tied a red string, which Enon had given him, to the sword handle before leaving that morning. If he wanted to keep Enon’s advice to always carry it, tying it there seemed the best way. It was a relief that it matched well without seeming out of place, according to Gakane’s words.

“The sword, yes, I got it… The string is mine.”

“I see. It suits you well. It makes you look incredibly strong.”

“Thank you.”

As Yuder expressed his thanks, Gakane was about to say something else, but the atmosphere suddenly buzzed with activity, and everyone’s gaze turned towards Kishiar, who was returning.

“It seems the march is about to begin.”

“Ah, I’ll return to my post. See you later, Yuder!”

While Kanna, who had once again turned pale with tension, clenched her fists, Gakane returned to where the Shin Division and his companions gathered. Following Gakane’s departing figure, Yuder unintentionally glanced in that direction and briefly exchanged a nod with Devran Hartude, who was smiling upon noticing him.

After returning to the capital and receiving treatment for several days, Devran, who had completely erased traces of his torture, had started to act very friendly towards Yuder. Although he suspected the sudden friendliness was due to Devran witnessing his violet-tinged injury and sharing the secret, Yuder was relieved that he kept it well.

“Yuder! Over here.”

Finally, Kishiar, who had returned to where the Cavalry had gathered, looked around for Yuder. Leaving Kanna behind, Yuder approached him. During the short walk, a few colleagues approached him, unable to hide their excitement and tension.

“Yuder, you look terrific today. Like a truly noble person.”

“You too, Steiber.”

Steiber Rendley, the Sul Division Deputy Commander with a pleasant smile, patted Yuder’s shoulder. The Shin Division Deputy Commander Ever Beck, who had styled her long hair unusually high, also greeted him from beside.

“Yuder. We’re heading to the 6th Wall right after this, right? I keep forgetting if I remembered it correctly.”

“Yes, we are. Even if you try to run away because you don’t want to go, I’m confident I can find you and bring you back, so you don’t need to be that nervous.”

At Yuder’s calm response, Ever managed a smile. After passing them, Yuder finally stood in front of Kishiar, whose eyes, red as gems, were staring at him.

“Your coat is disheveled.”

Looking down, he saw that his uniform’s coat had slightly come undone as he had brushed past the troops. Yuder reached out to

adjust it, but Kishiar was quicker. His fingers, covered in white gloves, gracefully adjusted Yuder's coat and even brushed off a piece of dust.

"…Thank you."

"You're welcome."

The sight of the imperial family member, Duke Peletta, personally adjusting someone's coat made people murmur in surprise. Yuder couldn't bring himself to turn his gaze towards them. Regardless, Kishiar just stood there, smiling.

"Thanks to your highness's grace, I'm likely to be misunderstood quite a bit today."

"That's not too bad."

"For me, it is."

"Whichever way, isn't it better for the Cavalry to be the talk of the town? Enjoy it."

Lowering his gaze and flashing an elegant smile, Kishiar waved towards the capital's citizens who were cheering for him from afar. Instantly, the cheers grew so loud that they could have deafened him.

"There he is! That's Duke Peletta! The brother of His Majesty the Emperor!"

"Wowwww!"

"Sounds like you're going deaf. How will you manage if this continues before we even start?"

Nathan Zuckerman, his face scrunched up amidst the roaring cheers, appeared, leading a huge white horse. It was the horse

Kishiar was supposed to ride during the march.

“It’s just a wave of a hand, after all.”

Kishiar took the reins from Nathan’s hand and smoothly mounted the horse. The cheers again surged, engulfing the entire street. Yuder, seeing Nathan Zuckerman’s expression darken even more in his proper Peletta Knight attire and armor, opened his mouth.

“Sir Nathan, I heard you’ll be accompanying me, following on either side of the horse. Which side do you plan on taking?”

“Either side is fine, but since the Cavalry should be most visible to the people, I’ll take the left.”

The right was directly visible to the crowd, while the left was a spot overshadowed by Kishiar and his horse.

After acknowledging Nathan’s choice, Yuder stood to the right of the horse Kishiar was riding. Then, as they had been trained, the remaining Cavalry members started to line up behind them. The Deputy Commanders of each Division stood at the very front, and then the members lined up in pairs. Seeing the confident look of the lined-up members, the crowd erupted in admiration and curiosity.

“Are those the people in the Cavalry? They look incredibly strong.”

“Their outfits are cool. This year, the Cavalry is more worth watching than the Imperial Knights.”

‘The continuous practice was worth it.’

Yuder smiled faintly, making sure no one else could see. Considering how desperate things were when they first practiced this parade a few days ago, the current situation was almost unbelievably improved.

As he heard the horn being blown three times in the distance, Yuder visualized the parade schedule that was about to begin today. The Imperial Troops always stood at the very front of the parade, followed by the Imperial Knights and the Imperial Mages, and then the rest of the participants.

The Cavalry, participating for the first time this year, had yet to set off since they were at the very end, but judging by the atmosphere, it didn't seem like they would be received poorly.

'Of course. We worked hard to make it that way.'

"We're about to depart. The signal came."

Kishiar, holding the signaling baton, spoke. Yuder heard the sound of a cannon firing in the distance and looked back. His 330 Cavalry comrades, stiff with excitement, came into view.

After scanning each of their faces, Yuder made sure everyone could see him as he curled up the corners of his mouth in a smile.

"Nervous?"

"…"

"No need to be. This event isn't even as challenging as a single lap around the training field."

While the parade was a grand event, it was still a festival. They were not knights who must remain stern or soldiers, so there was no benefit to them being overly serious.

'In my previous life, everyone was so tense that they made many mistakes and took a lot of criticism. There was no need to be so stiff in such a place.'

In order to maintain an image that was fitting of them, those who were chosen based on their skills alone, regardless of their social status, a leisurely smile was best. At least, that was what Yuder had decided.

“Uh, yeah. Right. We run more than ten laps around the training ground every day, so this is nothing!”

Kanna, who had been rigid, broke into a small smile as if infected by Yuder’s rare grin. Subsequently, the other members also began to relax their stern expressions, one by one, and started to laugh.

“True. It’s really no big deal. It’s just like taking a round to celebrate the festival!”

“There wouldn’t be a single person who’d be overly scared about such a trivial matter, right?”

“The one who was frozen was you. Just a moment ago, you were standing there with a face that said you wanted to go to the bathroom. I saw everything.”

“Me, when did I?”

It was a miraculous scene. As Yuder looked at the Cavalry members who were openly smiling, a low voice came from above his head.

“Looks good.”

Turning his head, he saw Kishiar, holding the reins, smiling like a Sun God.

“Cavalry.”

“Yes!”

It was not a loud call, but the sight of all 330 members straightening their posture and responding at once to Kishiar's voice was truly spectacular.

"That's right. You are the Cavalry."

Kishiar La Orr's voice, standing under the brilliant sunlight, echoed in everyone's ears.

"Move forward with pride in that fact. I will always be in front, so there is no need to worry about losing your way. Understand?"

"Yes!"

As if waiting for that moment, the cannon fired once again.

It was a signal for the Cavalry to set off.

Listening to the cheering that was loud enough to make his ears go deaf, Yuder started to walk beside the horse Kishiar was riding. His heart was pounding, but his steps were firm.

In his previous life, Yudrain Aile, as the Commander of the Cavalry, participated in nearly ten parades. He was not nervous then, and he wasn't now, but there was one thing that was different from that time.

A serene emotion of not being worried, yet curious about what was ahead.

It was anticipation.

—

"The Cavalry is about to appear soon."

"Alright, understood."

Crown Prince Katchian La Orr, after hearing the whisper of the attendant's report in his ear, put down the cup in his hand. The parade, which circled the entire capital, traditionally started from the end of the seventh wall and ended in the huge square inside the fifth wall.

Therefore, foreigners or nobles who wanted to watch the parade sat in a secret balcony of an unusually high-end accommodation prepared within the fifth wall, from where they would view the spectacle. The place where the Crown Prince was seated was one such balcony.

"I see Duke Peletta has prepared quite meticulously. I thought we would see the amusing sight of them herding around the common-born who could barely walk properly because they were frozen with fear."

Sitting opposite, Duke Diarca opened his mouth as if he had been waiting, wearing a grin like an old raccoon. He too had just received a whispered report from his servant, so he knew exactly how perfectly the Cavalry was performing in the parade.

And that was not the sight Duke Diarca had expected.

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Chapter 118

A cacophony of cheers began to echo from afar. It was the appearance of the Cavalry. From beyond the transparent wall of the balcony, imbued with magic, the Crown Prince and Duke Diarca watched a man boldly riding a white horse at the head of the group. It was Duke Peletta, Kishiar La Orr, the man they had just been speaking of, who waved with a leisurely smile on his face.

The Crown Prince's eyes narrowed, the sight of him recalling a myth of the Sun God, who had overturned a thousand stars rushing towards the ground and had eventually risen brilliantly.

He looks healthy every time I see him.

You're right. Who could have expected that Duke Peletta would live so healthily at that age?

Duke Diarca sipped his transparent crimson wine, chuckling softly.

Fate can be quite ugly.

Yes, indeed. Incredibly ugly. To someone, it feels as if the blessing of God is really there.

The Crown Princes gaze moved beyond Kishiar to the dark-uniformed processions behind him. Those who wouldnt have dared dream of such a place just a little while ago wore bright smiles that seemed to mock him. As the Crown Prince turned his head and sank deeply into the plush chair, Duke Diarca quickly sensed his discomfort and broke the silence.

No matter how strong the blessing of God is, it's ultimately a curse. Remember, the most meaningful thing is power, right?

…

Now that power is in your hands, Your Highness. Still, do you feel threatened by Duke Peletta?

There’s no reason to.

Upon hearing the terse response, Duke Diarca smiled like a grandfather imparting wisdom.

That’s right. All Duke Peletta can do is just play these little games. No matter how he tries to compensate for his inferiority, it does not change who will lead this Empire in the future.

Duke Diarcas icy gaze landed on Kishiar’s head as he steadily approached. The young Duke reflected in his eyes was a truly annoying and bothersome existence.

We need to make that fact clear this time.

Finally, Crown Prince Katchian met Duke Diarcas gaze squarely. Laughter rose over his dark, gem-like eyes, resembling the Dukes.

Good. I’m looking forward to it.

The preparations will start soon, so please enjoy.

As Duke Diarca’s words came to an end, a sharp scream erupted from the center of the previously cheering crowd. The Crown Prince casually propped his chin, looking down at the cavalrymen who could not hide their confusion amidst the panicking crowd.

What’s that!

Who are those guys?

It has begun.

Yuder looked around, listening to the screams and shouts that reverberated noisily in his ears. There hadn't been any problems in front of the Cavalry during their march of the fifth wall. However, as they entered the district of luxury residences, filled with ostentatious and towering balconies, several masked assailants suddenly appeared.

Their faces concealed by cloth, they used elongated, blade-like fingernails and fists as hard as steel to take several bystanders hostage. They then swiftly blocked Kishiar and the Cavalry's path, plunging the surroundings into fear.

"What the devil are you doing! How dare you in the sacred capital where the Emperor himself resides! Surrender immediately!"

As the march came to a standstill, several Imperial Troops, previously dispersed to maintain order, converged rapidly. They brandished their swords, but it was to no avail.

One of the intruders stepped forward, creating a fierce flame. The troops lost their fighting spirit in an instant, succumbing to fear and retreating.

"Did you just see that? He spat out fire! It's an Awakener!"

"Run away!"

The street turned into complete chaos. The Cavalry members, having realized that the intruders were Awakeners, also lost their previous composure, filled with tension.

"Commander! What should we do?"

Sul Division Deputy Commander Steiber yelled toward Kishiar with a grim expression.

"If you order us to capture them, we will charge in immediately!"

Unlike the members who were focused on Kishiar, Yuder glanced towards the luxury accommodations not too far away. Balconies there were crafted with special magic and mechanisms, making it impossible to see the inside from the outside. So, he couldn't tell who was sitting there.

'But surely, they must be watching us from somewhere over there.'

Yuder speculated that Emperor Katchian, or rather, the Crown Prince, whom he knew, would surely be doing so. He, who was naturally more suspicious than others, would have wanted to see for himself what was happening here.

It was apparent to anyone that among the many opportunities generously given to the Cavalry by the Crown Prince and Duke Diarca, there would be a trap. However, the timing was much faster than anticipated.

He thought they would watch for the first day of the festival and move on, but it seemed the opponents didn't even want to give them that much leeway. The fact that they sent not ordinary beasts but Awakeners also indicated immense malice.

Though it was undoubtedly a dangerous situation, Yuder wasn't overly worried. The man who stepped forward was Kishiar La Orr. He and Yuder had anticipated such events from the start and accepted everything.

He should be able to handle this much.

"Are you the famous Commander of the Cavalry, Duke Peletta?"

One of the intruders, who had taken an old woman hostage, asked Kishiar with a heavily scratched voice.

"That's right."

The Duke’s response was cool and collected, his demeanor surprisingly elegant in contrast to the sharpness of the question.

Those who heard Kishiar’s voice momentarily felt embarrassed for their earlier panic. As everyone suddenly fell silent, the commotion around them gradually subsided as if by magic.

“All of this… all of this is your fault!”

Feeling the change in atmosphere, the intruders intentionally raised their voices and tightened their grip around the hostage’s neck, forcing her to scream.

“Please, spare me…!”

The momentary calm exploded into chaos once more. Kishiar’s gaze briefly landed on the hostage before returning to the intruder.

“I’m not sure what you mean. Are you saying that your act of threatening the innocent people of the Orr Empire is my fault?”

“Are you denying it? You lured us here with lies and then abandoned us!”

One of the intruders yelled angrily in response to Kishiar’s words.

“We put everything on the line to join your Cavalry, trusting in you, and yet you didn’t even bother to look at us in person! You just randomly picked to your liking and kicked out the rest without a second thought!”

Upon hearing this, the entire Cavalry stiffened. Yuder felt an unexpected surge of emotion.

‘They weren’t just simple Awakeners, they were the ones who had applied for the Cavalry test.’

The claim that Kishiar didn’t personally see the people and randomly picked was not true. He had been using magic to alter his face at the time. Moreover, according to Yuder’s knowledge, those who failed the Cavalry test were given enough money for their return trip, with some to spare.

Yet if they chose to stay in the capital, that was their decision, not because of Kishiar or the Cavalry. However, those unaware of the circumstances were moved by their desperate outcry. Yuder turned to look at Kishiar, feeling the rising tension within the Cavalry.

‘It would be better to shut them up and knock them out before they say more.’

Yet Kishiar remained calm, a faint smile playing on his face.

“There are countless like us within this capital, because of that useless Cavalry you created to play Commander! We’re all doomed! Now we will kill everyone and we will die too!”

The capital and central region had been tolerant towards Awakeners. This was especially true since Kishiar, a member of the imperial family, was one of the first Awakeners. To the general populace, everything about the imperial family was seen as a blessing from the Sun God. The central region, where the emperor’s power was most directly exerted, was no exception.

Yet the masked stranger’s cry was enough to plant a seed of doubt and fear in the hearts of the common folk.

Could they truly trust Awakeners possessing such powerful abilities to be safe? How could they guarantee they would not randomly murder people as they were doing now?

Could Kishiar, who had formed the Cavalry with such people and then did nothing for months, really be concerned about the safety of the citizens?

As the intruder growled and snarled, appealing their unfortunate situation, the crowd saw a different side of ‘Awakeners.’ Until now, Awakeners to them had been the elegant Duke Peletta in his fine uniform and his stalwart followers, but now these terrifying individuals, who were howling and choking an old woman in front of them, were also Awakeners.

Doubt and fear filled the streets. It echoed the inexplicable hostility they had experienced in the eastern region. Having traveled the east, Yuder was sensitive to this atmosphere.

‘If they keep shouting, it will be too late.’

He didn’t know why Kishiar was leaving these men unchecked, but he felt he couldn’t endure it anymore. Yuder slightly raised his hand, intending to deal with them now and face any repercussions later.

Yet, as if sensing this, Kishiar glanced back for a moment. Caught off guard, Yuder tensed up, like a child caught doing something wrong.

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Chapter 119

“…”

Kishiar, who had been smiling with narrowed eyes at the sight, suddenly leapt from his horse and descended onto the ground. Even though he had dismounted, his figure was far taller than any ordinary man, his very presence exerting an overwhelming force.

“Is that all?”

He asked as he turned to look at the intruders. It was a brief question, yet the thug who received his gaze felt an immense pressure, as if being physically crushed. He struggled to attribute this pressure to mere emotions, raising his voice and shouting.

“Y-Yes. All of them died because of you! Remember this…!”

The thug’s zealous cry was suddenly cut off. Among the many people gathered, very few understood what had happened in that brief moment. Even the Cavalry members were in the same predicament.

However, Yuder felt a surge of incredibly small, yet potent force tearing through the air. Launched like a shot from Kishiar’s fingertips, it precisely struck only the intruders in the blink of an eye before vanishing as if it were an illusion.

Moments later, the intruders fell to the ground as if struck by an unseen force, silently collapsing. The only ones left standing were the hostages held by them. But even those hostages were trembling, dumbfounded, unaware of what had happened.

In the midst of confusion and a situation that could not be understood, silence froze over the streets. Amidst this eerie quiet,

Kishiar spoke.

“Countless people visit the Pearl Tower each year, wishing to become mages. However, less than one in a thousand are chosen to train as mages. If one who failed to become a mage falls onto a dark path, is that the sin of the Pearl Tower?”

Everyone’s gaze turned toward Kishiar.

“…”

“I created the Cavalry to protect innocent people from such individuals. The fact that my judgment of people was correct can be sufficiently understood just by looking at the acts these men have committed. There’s no need for further words.”

Kishiar’s fiery gaze swept over all those overwhelmed by him, and beyond them toward the luxury lodgings in the distance, before returning.

“Imperial troops.”

As he raised his hand and pointed at the Imperial troops who had retreated to a corner as if fleeing, a reply came from the men who still seemed shocked.

“Y-Yes, sir!”

“Arrest them immediately and imprison them. They are criminals who took advantage of the festival to disrupt the capital where the Emperor resides. Until I interrogate them personally, no one is to approach them.”

“Understood!”

“The Cavalry will begin marching again, so quickly reorganize the ranks.”

“Yes, sir!”

“And……”

As the Cavalry members began to reform their ranks and the Imperial Troops hastily ran over to arrest the fainted intruders, Yuder suddenly saw the hand of one of the intruders, being dragged on the ground, begin to turn a bright red and swell as if it were about to burst.

‘That is…’

Realizing that he had seen this scene before, his body moved on its own.

“Everyone, let go and step back!”

“Ahhhh!”

The moment Yuder waved his hand, a tremendous gust of wind arose, sweeping away the troops and forming a protective barrier around the intruders. Shortly after, an appalling sound rang out as grotesquely swollen bodies exploded all at once.

Screams echoed from every direction, but nothing emerged from beyond the wall of wind. Yuder then manipulated the earth, swiftly burying all the debris beneath it, before exhaling and lifting his head.

“Ah.”

The gazes of the Cavalry members, wide-eyed like startled rabbits, were one thing, but the gaze of Kishiar, staring straight at him from behind, was terribly piercing.

Yet before Yuder could say a word, Kishiar strode forward, lifting one hand high to draw all eyes back to him, and spoke.

“Now, observe. Should anyone dare to threaten the safety of our Empire, remember that they will be judged as you have just witnessed.”

“Whoa… Wow!”

Only then did the previously frozen spectators start to regain their senses and start cheering. Amid thunderous applause, a massive cheer, as if the whole city was about to lift off, poured down over the heads of the Cavalry.

“His Grace the Duke has swiftly vanquished the intruders!”

“Long live His Grace the Duke of Peletta! Long live the Emperor!”

“Long live the Cavalry!”

Amid the shower of petals, Yuder averted his gaze as he felt Kishiar’s chilly eyes turning towards him, while he wore a smile on his face.

“I thought I told you not to use your power recklessly.”

“I had no choice because it was urgent.”

During their march to Victory Square, the final destination of the procession, Yuder heard Kishiar’s reprimand, spoken so quietly that no one else could hear.

“Just removing the troops would have been enough.”

“Don’t you know that would not have been enough to completely prevent the damage?”

It was a mood Kishiar had laboriously changed, stepping forward himself. The reason he showed his overwhelming power there was likely because he knew the Crown Prince was watching. It was certainly better than ruining his hard work.

He thought it was a valid excuse, but Kishiar’s gaze on his cheek turned slightly sharper. Pretending not to notice, he ignored it until a sigh was heard a moment later.

“How’s your hand?”

“It’s fine.”

“I don’t trust you, show me later.”

“…”

The atmosphere wasn’t one that would believe him if he said it didn’t hurt at all. Yuder casually replied okay, then turned to look at Kishiar’s face.

“But what about you, Commander? What power did you use earlier? Didn’t you send something flying?”

“You saw that?”

“More like… I felt it.”

“You’re sensitive as always.”

The corners of Kishiar’s mouth rose slowly into a smile at his murmur, whether it was praise or not.

“I flicked the air with my fingertips.”

“Excuse me?”

“Like this.”

He released the reins he had been holding and flicked his forefinger against his thumb, as if playing a children’s game of flicking marbles.

“Nothing happened because I did it slowly for you to see, but if I add strength and do it quickly, I can do as I did earlier. It seems simple, but it’s quite difficult. However, the results are overwhelming.”

Yuder suspected that Kishiar might be lying. Yet, he could not sense any deceit from his handsome visage.

‘Could he exert his strength in such a manner? But… He never showcased such an attack in his previous life.’

In his past life, Kishiar hardly used his power, resorting to hand-to-hand combat only when absolutely necessary. Hence, Yuder wondered if the recent attack he’d seen was perhaps a spell, borrowing the power of a magic tool. But if it was not magic, why hadn’t Kishiar utilized that power in his previous life?

Noticing the questioning look on Yuder’s face, Kishiar’s eyes narrowed.

“Is something bothering you? You look unconvinced.”

“If it’s a simple ability to enhance one’s speed, shouldn’t Shin and most of the squad members be able to use it as well?”

The question was hasty, but Kishiar did not question its sincerity.

“That’s precisely the tricky part. It’s not merely about using force, but manipulating aura a little… hmm, the specifics are a secret. Anyway, you need to slightly mix in another power.”

Aura. Kishiar casually mentioned a capability only Knights and Swordmasters at their zenith could harness, before winking and turning his head.

‘Aura Is the difference between his past life and now because of that?’

In his previous life, Kishiar, who always wore gloves and seldom used power, and the current Kishiar, who did not hesitate to employ divine powers or aura and naturally exposed his bare hands.

If the Kishiar of the past life had been unable to utilize divine power or aura by force, it was natural that he couldn't execute attacks using those powers. Having pondered to this point, Yuder suddenly recalled the bitter expression Kishiar had in his dream.

'If only I had not shattered my vessel…'

What did the 'shattered vessel' that he spoke about mean?

Yuder began to believe more strongly that the dream he had was not a simple one, but might be closer to a memory that he had forgotten or had been made to forget for some reason. The recent incident intensified this thought.

Why he kept having such dreams, he did not know. He speculated that if he discovered the reason, he might also learn why he had returned eleven years back in time.

'I'm not particularly curious about how I managed to return.'

There was only one important thing.

He was certain that he could not let the same conclusion as before happen, no matter what.

—

"I'm sorry. Everything that I had prepared I failed to fulfill my role. My apologies."

After the Cavalry vanished amid cheers, Duke Diarca, who was bowing before the Crown Prince, looked completely different from before. The Crown Prince, however, was no different in this regard.

‘How on earth?’

The same thought crossed both of their minds.

They had set several traps to ensure that Kishiar and the Cavalry wouldn’t escape the blame easily. They believed that even if they slipped through one or two, they could never escape the last resortthe human bomb.

But Kishiar had brushed them all aside with an air of derision, disappeared amid thunderous cheers, as if treading on flowers. It was a spectacle they could scarcely believe, even as they witnessed it with their own eyes.

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Chapter 120

“…Indeed, it seems I’ve greatly underestimated the existence of the Awakeners.”

The Duke of Diarca murmured with a contorted face.

“Although similar to magic, I perceived them as being inferior to mages, and even if they were comparable to aura, I dismissed them as being far from matching Swordmasters. Those I actually saw seemed to confirm this…”

“Isn’t Duke Peletta of imperial blood? It isn’t strange for him to possess power beyond the norm. The power of an imperial family member’s inherent blessing has always been proven throughout history.”

The Crown Prince, having composed his disturbed expression, spoke slowly. Unlike the Duke of Diarca, his gaze remained steadily on the street where the cavalry had passed. One could barely believe what had happened at the spot that seemed as if someone had forcibly dug and then refilled it.

Just moments ago, a man there freely manipulated two elements - wind and earth. Although it happened in a blink of an eye, the Crown Prince was certain his eyes didn’t deceive him.

The assassins who were supposed to explode and die immediately upon failure, having been poisoned and double-bound with oaths to their mission, were effortlessly blocked by the man as if he had foreseen their attack.

He had met many individuals who boasted strong powers, but it was the first time one had left such a deep impression in such a short moment.

Recalling the man’s black hair and pale face, the Crown Prince narrowed his eyes. Meanwhile, the Duke of Diarca was still rambling on.

“…thus, the individuals prepared for Duke Peletta next time should be…”

“How about investigating that man instead?”

“Pardon?”

Caught off guard, Duke Diarca looked bewildered for a moment before following the Crown Prince’s gaze outside.

“Whom are you referring to, Your Highness?”

“The man who demonstrated his abilities in front of Duke Peletta.”

A smile as poisonous as venom spread across the thin lips of the Crown Prince.

“The Duke must not have had a proper look at the man, having stepped out briefly at the time.”

“That’s correct.”

“He possesses quite extraordinary abilities. I have a feeling he might prove useful, even if we can’t pull him to our side right now.”

Finally recalling who the Crown Prince was referring to, Duke Diarca couldn’t fully understand the Prince’s interest, as he hadn’t seen the man’s display of power.

‘He must find his appearance appealing.’

Thus, he inwardly concluded. Then, outwardly embodying grace and loyalty, he bowed respectfully.

“The fact that Your Highness has taken an interest arouses my curiosity as well. I’ll have him investigated immediately.”

From the onset of the Harvest Festival, an uproar erupted.

During the parade led by Duke Peletta Kishiar La Orr, they encountered intruders intending to indiscriminately harm the people. However, as soon as Kishiar himself stepped forward, the intruders fell helplessly, unable to move even a finger.

The carcasses of the dead intruders, torn apart as if by claws, made it impossible to further speculate on their origin. However, people were more enthralled by the fact that a member of the imperial family had personally defended their citizens. The tale of Duke Peletta forming the Cavalry to protect the innocent in front of the fallen intruders was being loudly acclaimed and discussed by the citizens in the capital for days on end.

The social circles where the nobles gathered were also abuzz with talk of the Cavalry. The initial attention the Cavalry received for standing up to Count Gallon and driving him out paled in comparison to the current fervor.

The spiteful rumors that Duke Peletta had created the Cavalry out of sheer boredom disappeared almost instantly. Emperor Keilusa, who rarely made public appearances and was therefore not very popular, also received more attention than ever before.

There were even conspiracy theories suggesting that the Emperor might have instigated the whole incident to counterbalance the Crown Prince and the four major ducal families.

The Cavalry members were equally motivated by the enthusiastic public attention. Their morale significantly boosted after successfully completing the parade. Even though there were several suspicious incidents targeting the Cavalry during various events around the

capital, the situations never escalated. This was because all the members handled the situations well, just as they had been trained.

‘Staying up all night training was worth it,’ thought Yuder, looking at the earnest faces of the dispatched members and nodding in satisfaction.

The place they were assigned to that day was the site of the largest open worship of the Sun God, presided over by the Pope himself. Believers from all over the continent gathered to attend the annual worship, so in addition to the Cavalry, the Imperial Knights, the Imperial Troops, and several Imperial Mages were also dispatched to maintain security.

Kishiar, who had to attend the worship not as the Commander of the Cavalry but as an imperial family member, was not among the members. However, the fact that the square in front of the Orr Cathedral, where the worship was being held, would be safer than ever with Yuder and Kishiar in the same space was certain.

Even though there were still hours left before the start of the worship, Yuder gave his last notice to the members, looking at the people who had already gathered like clouds.

“As I told you earlier, divide into pairs and guard your designated positions. Report immediately if there’s an anomaly, and remember each other’s locations well.”

“Got it.”

Due to the extreme importance of the worship that day, only about 20 members, deemed to have the most exceptional abilities among the Cavalry members, were chosen to attend. Hence, many familiar faces were present, including Ever, Steiber, and Kanna, the Deputy Commander of each Division, as well as Gakane, Jimmy, and the Eldore siblings, who already had a fairly close relationship with Yuder.

“Do not engage in personal conversations with strangers unless you’re assisting them. Don’t secretly consume food other than what’s provided. And don’t ever respond to Imperial Mages or, especially, Imperial Knights if they pick a fight during your mission.”

“Ah, Yuder. How many times have you said that since we started training? It’s drilled into our heads by now.”

“Right, I’ve got your rules memorized. Don’t talk, don’t sneak food, don’t fight!”

Hinn Eldore wrinkled her nose and shook her head in irritation. Finn Eldore loudly agreed, but Yuder, who already had something to say to the Eldore siblings, impassively opened his mouth without a change in expression.

“I have to keep repeating because there are people who don’t follow the rules. Like when you nearly started a fight with some knights the day before yesterday.”

“…”

Stung by the memory, the Eldore siblings abruptly changed the subject, avoiding Yuder’s gaze.

‘I wonder if it would be better to send those two back today… But they do their jobs well and their teleportation abilities might be needed in case of emergencies. Can’t help it.’

Yuder sighed softly, his gaze drifting to the other members of his team.

“Alright, everyone, back to your posts.”

The area Yuder was assigned to secure was the space between the platform where the Pope would stand and the place where the common believers stood. The VIP seats where the nobility sat were

quite a distance away, but he had a good view of the people seated there.

‘Kishiar hasn’t arrived yet?’

While observing the VIP seats, a mix of familiar and unfamiliar faces from his previous life, Kanna, who was assigned to guard the area with Yuder, approached him with a smile.

“This is really incredible. Right? I’ve attended this grand ceremony a few times, but it’s the first time I’ve seen it this close. It’s quite intriguing.”

Judging by her reaction, Kanna seemed fascinated by the spectacle of the ceremony, which she was seeing for the first time. While Yuder had grown tired of such events from his past life, he considered his colleague’s enthusiasm and nodded in agreement.

At that moment, a few Imperial Knights, standing not too far away, made a sound as if to attract attention, their faces twisted in distaste.

“Isn’t it great that even commoners get to see the Holy Pope in the same place as nobles because they’re well-connected? It’s nice to see them chatting as if they’re here for pleasure rather than duty, completely ignoring our words.”

“Aren’t we always the ones who do the work, while the black coats get the praise?”

The term “black coats” was a new derogatory phrase created by the Imperial Knights to belittle the Cavalry. The blunt sarcasm of the knights reddened Kanna’s ears with rage.

“Kanna.”

“Don’t worry, Yuder. This is nothing compared to the things I had to endure in the Gallon household.”

At Yuder’s call, Kanna turned her gaze, a smile appearing on her face.

“But I will remember their faces. It wouldn’t hurt to get back at them a little after everything is over, right?”

Yuder was curious about what kind of revenge Kanna was planning, but seeing her darkly burning gaze, he figured it was better not to know. He told her she could do whatever she wanted after the festival ended and turned his gaze back to the VIP seats.

Kishiar had yet to arrive, but more than half of the VIP seats were already occupied. The elegant nobles, who had been laughing and chatting, suddenly stood up and looked in one direction. Soon, Crown Prince Katchian and Duke Diarca appeared, followed by their entourage.

‘The person standing behind Duke Diarca… was it his heir, Viscount Kironne? And… Kiolle of Diarca?’

Yuder, who had been scrutinizing the faces of the newcomers, narrowed his eyes at the sight of the familiar face of Kiolle among the servants following Duke Diarca. Kiolle appeared quite uncomfortable, unable to hide his unease, like a spooked animal with its fur on end.

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Chapter 121

‘It seems he has safely returned from Hartan.’

Yuder, who inwardly clicked his tongue at the figure who openly displayed his reluctance to come, suddenly felt someone’s gaze directed at him and shifted his eyes.

‘…’

The owner of the gaze was a boy sitting diagonally behind Kiolle da Diarca. As soon as their eyes met, the boy with the lovely features of a doll, his reddish hair, immediately turned his head in a different direction.

‘I don’t think I’ve seen his face before… Who is he?’

However, Yuder was not given the opportunity to ponder the boy’s identity. This was because Kishiar, with his adjutant Nathan Zuckerman, made his appearance at the VIP seat.

“Behold, His Grace Duke Peletta!”

“Long live Duke Peletta! Long live the Emperor!”

A cheer erupted from the section where common believers had gathered, far louder than when the Crown Prince had appeared. Kishiar lightly raised his hand in acknowledgment of the cheer, then approached the Crown Prince and exchanged greetings.

While outwardly they conversed as members of the imperial family, the air between them was subtly tense. Watching the Crown Prince Katchian, who was handing some words over to Kishiar with a smile, Yuder felt an unfamiliar emotion.

‘Crown Prince Katchian seems to openly dislike Kishiar. Was it always like this?’

Yuder, who had been a close aide of the emperor for a long time since Katchian ascended the throne, knew very well how his eyes looked when he was in an extremely bad mood. The young Crown Prince, who was barely in his late teens, seemed unable to fully hide his emotions.

‘I didn’t know when I saw him with Kishiar in my previous life…’

Throughout the festival, Yuder thought that the person causing trouble around the Cavalry was Duke Diarca, even if it seemed outwardly to be the Crown Prince. He had considered it a mere attempt to stamp out the budding threat of the newborn Cavalry which couldn’t really be a sincere threat to the Crown Prince’s faction.

However, seeing that expression, Yuder wondered if the Crown Prince’s will was more involved in this matter than he had initially thought.

‘Previously, as soon as Emperor Katchian ascended the throne, Kishiar retired quickly and died soon after… I never thought about their relationship.’

But on reflection, Katchian was the one who issued the order to assassinate Kishiar. The obvious fact felt strangely unfamiliar.

It made him think that the memory of the day he had gone to kill Kishiar might have been distorted. Perhaps there had been circumstances unknown to him hidden in Katchian’s orders, which he had hitherto considered purely political decisions.

Yuder looked at the face of Crown Prince Katchian, who still showed signs of youth, and overlaid it with the future image of him.

“Yuder. Do you like the Commander that much? You can’t take your eyes off him as soon as he arrives.”

Just then, Kanna joked, snapping him out of his almost grave contemplation.

“No, it’s not like that.”

“Well, you don’t need to deny it so vehemently. We’re all the same after all.”

Among the nobles seated in the guest section, many drew the attention of others due to their distinct appearances, a result of their imperial blood. Prince Katchian of the imperial family, for instance, had been compared to a splendid flower since his childhood for his exceptional beauty. Yet, even amidst such nobles, Kishiar commanded an overwhelming presence. Anyone who had once seen him found it difficult to easily tear their eyes away, as if they were entranced by something.

“Ah, the Commander seems to be looking around. Do you think he might be searching for us?”

Before Yuder could retort that it was unlikely, he saw Kishiar, who had just noticed them, flash a bright smile and swiftly closed his mouth.

“Duke Peletta is looking our way!”

Even if he wanted to believe that Kishiar was not looking at them, he couldn’t deny it due to the enthusiastic reactions of the surrounding believers. Yuder pretended not to notice Kishiar’s gaze, but Kishiar defiantly began waving his hand. The cheers instantly grew louder. Amid the loud acclaim, Kanna, while holding back her laughter and waving back at Kishiar, spoke.

“See, I told you! You should greet him too, Yuder. If you don’t, he’ll continue like this.”

“…”

Without a choice, Yuder glared at Kishiar and briefly bowed his head in greeting. It was a small gesture, but it seemed enough to satisfy Kishiar, who lowered his hand. However, due to his unusual behavior, the surrounding nobles turned their gaze towards Yuder.

Most lost interest quickly after seeing the military uniform that Yuder and Kanna were wearing. But a few were different. Kiolle, too surprised at discovering Yuder, opened his mouth wide then suddenly turned his head away. Prince Katchian, for some unknown reason, gazed at them for quite some time.

After his cold gaze disappeared, Yuder decided to complain about this incident to Kishiar later on.

“The Holy Pope will appear shortly. All believers, prepare yourselves.”

Not long after, the worship began. Twelve senior priests came forward, sprinkling holy water and reciting prayers of blessing. Soon, the elderly Pope, dressed in a long, thick white robe, revealed himself.

‘His name was Mclaren III… It’s been a long time.’

Yuder looked up at the face of the Pope who would leave this world about five years from now. Even though he had only seen him face to face a few times in official settings, it was strangely emotional to see this man, who was dead in his memory, alive in front of his eyes.

The nobles, who did not appear particularly devout, acted like deeply faithful believers during the worship. Among the common

believers, many were moved to tears upon seeing the Pope.

While watching these scenes and staying vigilant for any suspicious signs, the time for the end of the worship service approached.

As the Pope finished his final prayer, a waterfall of light made of divine power cascaded from above, evoking admiration and prayers that resonated throughout the square.

It was a beautiful sight, but those who were dispatched to maintain security could not afford to observe it for long. They had to be alert to control the crowd that was about to leave the square en masse. Sure enough, as soon as the Pope finished his blessing and rose from his seat with the senior priests, the common believers started rushing towards the exit of the square.

Yuder had saved several individuals who were scrambling among the crowd using the power of the wind, and handed over the crying children who had lost their parents to nearby Imperial Troops. The narrow exit of the plaza was a chaotic mess, overcrowded with those trying to leave.

‘Why on earth do they insist on worshipping in such a place? It can’t be the only available location. Such a perverse preference.’

“Yuder, I’ll be right back! I’m going to help that old lady over there! She seems to have lost her group.”

“Alright.”

“I’ll be back soon!”

Kanna, who had been using her abilities to assist those in need just like Yuder, spotted another distressed individual and ran over to them, leaving Yuder alone with a troubled expression on his face.

After Kanna disappeared, Yuder sighed momentarily, only to turn his head toward a small voice that suddenly echoed from behind him.

“Um, you’re a member of the Cavalry, right?”

It appeared to be another person who had lost their way and needed help, but the person turned out to be unexpected. A boy with a doll-like, beautiful appearance, wearing a simple black cloak, was looking up at Yuder with a stern expression on his face.

Yuder glanced toward the VIP seats. But the nobles, including Kishiar, who had been there, had all disappeared.

‘Did he not lose his way, but came here intentionally?’

Even if he was a young boy, if he was a noble invited to the VIP seats of the Grand Worship, he wouldn’t be an ordinary clan member. Feeling a hint of suspicion, Yuder slowly opened his mouth.

“It might be better if you ask for help from the priests or the Imperial Knights rather than me.”

“They can’t help me. I came looking for you.”

The boy’s voice was very small, but it penetrated his ears with peculiar clarity.

“Could you hear my story in a place that’s out of sight from others? It will only take a moment.”

At that moment, Yuder’s eyes widened slightly.

‘…Is he an Awakener?’

He had felt a faint energy, although it wasn’t entirely certain. But the energy he felt from the boy was undoubtedly the unique power of the Awakener.

‘What should I do?’

Yuder hesitated for a moment. How could he be sure that this wasn’t a trap set by Duke Diarca to target the Cavalry? When considering the team, it would obviously be right to send the boy away. However, for some reason, he felt uneasy about the boy’s eyes, which, contrary to his confident demeanor, trembled like a small animal being chased.

“Follow me.”

In the end, Yuder led the boy behind a large statue of an angel, out of the view of others. A place where a few old trees intertwined skillfully to form a shade, making it an ideal location to hide.

“It seems you’d prefer to avoid the eyes of others, so it might be better if you cover your face with your hood while we talk.”

“Oh, ah, um. Thank you.”

As he lightly pulled the tip of the hood that hung behind the boy’s cloak over his head, a flustered voice of gratitude returned.

‘Seeing his clumsy behavior, he doesn’t seem like he’s here to cause trouble.’

Then, what could be the reason? Yuder opened his mouth, his curiosity piqued.

“So, what is it that you want to talk about?”

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Chapter 122

“So, what is it you wanted to talk about?”

“…”

The boy, who had been so bold until now, found himself unable to speak when the moment to discuss came. In the silence, Yuder waited for him to gather his words, sighing as he glanced around.

“I don’t have an abundance of time either. The only reason I followed an unknown noble like yourself here is because you’re an Awakener, nothing more, nothing less. If you have nothing to say then perhaps it’s time we…”

“How…how did you know I was an Awakener?”

The boy cut himself off mid-sentence, surprised by the question.

“No one else knew…”

“I knew because I felt your power when you spoke to me just now.”

“You felt it? What kind of ability?”

“I can’t quite tell what kind of power it is. I only sensed it when you used it.”

At Yuder’s words, the boy shivered for a moment and let out a small sigh.

“I…I can make only the person I want hear my voice. It’s not much of an ability. I used it just a little while ago when I was

speaking to you, so I wouldn’t attract attention… I see. You can sense that.”

After saying this, the boy raised his head, revealing his eyes which had been hidden beneath his large hat. He looked surprised, but his demeanor was now noticeably more composed.

“My name is Revlin Shand Apeto. I’m the third and youngest child of the Apeto family.”

Yuder had guessed he was the child of a notable family, though he had not expected him to be of the Apeto Duke’s lineage. Despite being surprised by the identity of his significant counterpart, Yuder didn’t show it on his face.

Emboldened by Yuder’s composed demeanor, the boy, Revlin, continued to speak.

“Not long ago, didn’t someone in your Cavalry get kidnapped or almost got kidnapped?”

‘What is this about?’

It had been a while since he’d encountered someone who consistently made such unexpected comments. Yuder narrowed his eyes at Revlin’s tense expression.

“Why do you ask?”

“I can give you information about that incident. In return, let me meet Duke Peletta.”

The kidnapping incident Revlin was referring to was undoubtedly what happened to Devran. Yuder already knew the Apeto family was behind the incident. However, he had never imagined a member of the family would directly appear before him with such a proposition.

For now, Yuder was relieved that Revlin had chosen him out of all the Cavalry members. But whether to accept his offer right there and then was a separate matter.

Revlin, perhaps interpreting Yuder's thoughtful gaze as suspicion, quickly added more words.

"I know you may find it suspicious, but I don't mean any harm. My family means nothing to me now."

"And how are we to believe the information you'll provide will be of use to us?"

Yuder veered the conversation, scrutinizing Revlin. If the information Revlin was offering was no more useful than what they already knew, why would they accept the deal? Revlin, seemingly prepared for such skepticism, opened his mouth with a determined look in his eyes.

"It'll definitely be useful. The Apeto family is conducting research to eliminate the 'Blood of Blessing'. Kidnapping and collecting Awakeners is a part of that. I believe Duke Peletta will find this information interesting."

'…Blood of Blessing?'

It was a peculiar word that seemed both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. As Yuder tried to jog his memory, Revlin gazed at him with tired eyes.

"There's only one thing I want in exchange for the information. It's a small favor. If you could free just one person whom I cannot save myself… then I can do anything."

"… You're asking me to save someone?"

“Yes. He was my bodyguard. He’s also an Awakener, but now he’s…”

Unable to finish his sentence, Revlin bit his lower lip until it bled, a flash of deep fury crossing his eyes.

“I’ll tell you the details later. Just please, pass this message to Duke Peletta.”

“If you wanted to meet the Commander, you could have said so when he was in the VIP seat earlier. Why go through the trouble of finding me now?”

“I couldn’t let my second older brother find out. He’s the one who brought me here. Actually, I had to leave quickly, so I need to go back before he starts looking for me.”

A wave of anxiety could be felt from Revlin, who was anxiously glancing around. Yuder looked down at the boy who was tightly clutching the hem of his cloak, awaiting his response, and nodded, signaling his agreement.

“I will pass your message to the Commander.”

“Really?”

“But if this deal goes through, how do you plan to meet the Commander?”

“You can contact me through Jack, the gatekeeper of the Apeto estate. I can meet if we set a time. I just have to say that I’m stepping out for a bit. There’s someone I need to save, so please come as soon as the decision is made, preferably tonight.”

Worried that Yuder might say it would be difficult, Revlin quickly retorted, his eyes darting around.

Although Yuder wondered if it was really alright, he knew that from here on out, it was a matter for Kishiar to decide.

“Understood. I will tell him as such.”

“Thank you. Really, thank you. …I just realized I haven’t asked your name yet. I’m sorry, I was in such a rush. What’s your name?”

The boy blushed with embarrassment as he asked Yuder’s name after thanking him repeatedly. While Yuder wondered whether he needed to share his name as well, he decided to reply considering the courage Revlin showed by revealing his real name without any hesitation.

“I’m Yuder Aile.”

Until the very last moment before he left, the boy looked back at Yuder several times. The desperate gaze of the boy, who was as beautiful as a doll, unlike a noble boy, deeply embedded itself in his mind.

“Interesting. Not only did one of Apeto’s sons turn out to be an Awakener, but he’s also proposing to betray his own family. If Duke Apeto knew, he would probably feel quite betrayed.”

Kishiar’s reaction to the report on Revlin Shand Apeto was more succinct than Yuder had expected. Yuder, looking at Kishiar who was still dressed in his pearl-like white formal attire from the Grand Worship and reading the documents, cautiously asked a question.

“Do you believe what Revlin Shand Apeto said?”

“Whether I believe it or not, it’s likely true. Besides, you’ve already confirmed that he is indeed an Awakener, haven’t you?”

“Even so…”

“Do you know? Out of 330 Cavalry members, not a single noble has their family member in it.”

Kishiar interrupted Yuder’s words, softly posing a question.

“Why do you think that is?”

As Kishiar had said, there was not a single member of the Cavalry who had been born into a noble family from the capital. Some, like Kanna, who had grown up in the quarrelsome house of Count Gallon, were children who did not inherit the last name. And then there were the few nobles in the Cavalry, like Gakane Bolunwald, who were from once illustrious, now fallen, local families who had lost their former glory. Faced with a question he hadn’t considered deeply before, Yuder felt a bit flustered and opened his mouth.

“Either there were no applicants from noble families in the capital or, if there were, Commander, you didn’t choose them.”

“The former is closer to the truth. To be precise, it’s because there hasn’t been a single Awakener, officially, from the wealthy families that are based in the capital.”

Kishiar laughed, placing particular emphasis on the word “officially.”

“Do you think it’s possible that not a single person had awakened in the two years since my awakening? There would be dozens, if only counting families of baronial rank and above.”

“…”

It was only then that Yuder realized the meaning behind Kishiar’s words.

“So even if they have Awakeners, they’re hiding it.”

“It’s due to the initial unfavorable circumstances. It will gradually change, starting with this festival… Anyway, because of this, the youngest son of Apeto you met is slated to be the first Awakener from a duke’s family that I know of. So, shouldn’t I meet him myself, including all these considerations?”

In his previous life, after Yuder had become Commander, occasionally young nobles from the capital would apply to join the Cavalry, so he hadn’t given this matter much thought.

‘At this time, Kishiar was fighting against many more things than I thought.’

Battling a single misinformed prejudice was far more difficult than killing hundreds of monsters. Looking at Kishiar, who seemed nonchalant about changing it soon, Yuder couldn’t help but think of him as extraordinary once again.

“So when do you plan to go?”

“Didn’t he ask to come as soon as possible? Shall we go now?”

Kishiar put down the document he had been holding and stood up from his seat.

“Are you planning to go directly? That’s too dangerous.”

“Don’t worry. I have quite a few useful friends.”

Kishiar laughed as he took out a slim, inconspicuous bracelet from the desk drawer and slipped it onto his wrist. Shortly after, his face and hair color blurred, transforming into an ordinary-looking man with brown hair and brown eyes.

“How is it? Did I transform well?”

Despite his height, broad shoulders, and the same formal attire as before, the change in face gave the impression of dealing with a completely different person. It was said that this feeling was also part of the effect of transformation magic, but looking at the hard-to-adapt appearance, Yuder sighed.

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Chapter 123

“…Let me accompany you.”

“There might be sensitive matters discussed, difficult to relay to others.”

“I will keep it confidential.”

A moment of hesitation flickered in Kishiar’s transformed hazel eyes. Yuder was determined not to let him go alone, even if it meant risking getting caught while tailing him in secret. Fortunately, Kishiar didn’t ponder for long and soon made a favorable decision.

“Alright.”

Kishiar left a short note for his absent adjutant, Nathan, on the desk, and changed his clothes. Yuder, too, donned the ordinary attire provided by Kishiar in place of his noticeable black uniform. Although slightly oversized, it didn’t look too awkward, which was a relief.

“You wear Nathan’s old night-outfit quite well. Just need a little more height.”

Scanning Yuder up and down, Kishiar nodded approvingly, giving a compliment that was somewhat ambiguous.

“I’ve stopped growing.”

“Aren’t you just 20? You’ve still got a few more years of growing.”

“…”

Not everyone continued growing past adulthood. Having lived through the future once, Yuder knew that he wouldn’t grow an inch

beyond his current height. He had considered himself quite tall among the Cavalry members, so Kishiar’s reaction was unexpected.

“Here. Lastly, wear this hat.”

Handing Yuder a hat often worn by laborers, Kishiar made sure his hair and face were sufficiently obscured before leading the way out of their quarters. Using shortcuts, they managed to leave the premises of the Imperial Knights without encountering anyone.

“The Apeto Ducal House is on the third wall. It’s heavily guarded, so from now on, we’re ordinary errand runners for a trading company.”

“Errand runners?”

“It’s the most suitable role.”

“Won’t they check which trading company we belong to at the checkpoint?”

“Don’t worry about that.”

Kishiar soon demonstrated the meaning behind his words. On the street, he hailed an empty coach waiting idly for passengers with its back door open. As they approached the checkpoint, he pulled out an unfamiliar identity badge from his pocket and handed it to the coachman.

“Show them this as proof at the checkpoint, and keep going.”

“Understood.”

Seeing Kishiar’s identity badge, the coachman, who initially appeared worried about the order to head into the third wall, immediately brightened up. Yuder managed to catch a glimpse of the inscription on the badge, his eyes widened.

“It’s an identity badge from the Shuden Trading Company.”

“Already caught a glimpse, did you? Yes, it’s the best card to play in this situation.”

Kishiar admitted with a smile. The Shuden Trading Company was one of the renowned trading firms across the continent. Its history might have been shorter compared to other renowned firms, but it had grown rapidly due to its specialized trade in luxurious goods. Known to be one of the few companies with a branch in the hard-to-reach south due to the desert, Shuden’s identity badge was undoubtedly not something anyone could acquire.

Yet Yuder remembered that in his previous life, Kishiar had occasionally conducted private trades with the Shuden Trading Company.

‘I had thought it natural for imperial family members to make expensive personal purchases Could it be that he obtained that with the connections he had built up in such a way?’

From the way Kishiar spoke, it seemed like he had used that social status badge more than once or twice.

“You seem to use it frequently.”

“Well I love to have fun so I get gifts like that. I can’t go around having fun under my own name, can I?”

By his smooth retort alone, he seemed like the endlessly frivolous imperial family member Kishiar that others perceived him to be. However, Yuder knew that this was not all there was to him and so did not accept his response at face value.

‘I need to look into this Shuden Trading Company and Kishiar’

“We’ll be arriving soon.”

At that moment, the coachman opened a small door and announced their impending arrival. Due to quickly passing the checkpoint, the time taken to reach their destination was shorter than expected. Kishiar, looking at the increasingly luxurious view outside the window, a stark contrast to the 7th Wall area they had initially departed from, quietly opened his mouth.

“Once we get off, you mustn’t refer to me as Commander. You know that, right?”

“Yes.”

The two men got off in front of a beautiful mansion. The wall that seemed to go on without an end made it hard to figure out where to go to find the gate, but Kishiar moved without hesitation. Before long, a giant gate made of iron revealed itself. It was the intimidating main residence of the Apeto family.

Kishiar showed no interest towards the large gate. He approached a very small guard post near the gate.

“Are you there?”

“Who is it?”

When he knocked on the door, an old man soon popped his head out from inside.

“I’m looking for Guard Jack.”

“I’m Jack.”

Jack eyed the two of them suspiciously, his face full of wariness.

“We’ve come from the Trading Company at the behest of the Third Prince. He is said to be looking for a very special item.”

But the moment he mentioned the Third Prince Revlin, his guarded expression melted away.

“Ah! Ahh. The Third Prince. I see. Are you the ones called by the Prince?”

“Yes.”

“I heard the story. The prince mentioned you might come in a few days, but you came very quickly. Anyway, please come in.”

The now polite Jack opened the side door and allowed them in.

“Please wait here for a moment. I’ll inform the prince.”

After leading them to what seemed like a small room where the gatekeeper stayed, Jack hurriedly disappeared. Yuder felt strange visiting the Apeto main residence this way, a place he had never visited in his previous life, and looked around.

The mansion was beautiful and massive, befitting the grandeur of a ducal family, but the gatekeeper’s space was incredibly cramped and shabby. It appeared the Apeto family didn’t feel the need to pay attention to a space used by a mere gatekeeper.

“They say that the Apeto main residence possesses a sacred beauty, akin to a house where the Sun God resides, but I wonder if the person who first said that would have still said it if they saw this place first.”

As if he had read his thoughts, Kishiar, from behind, posed a question. Surprised, Yuder turned his head to find Kishiar, unusually devoid of a smile, asking him.

“Isn’t it intriguing?

”

Yuder hesitated for a moment, unsure of how to respond. However, whether it was fortunate or unfortunate, the moment was broken as the door opened and Revlin Shand Apeto hurriedly came out, forever robbing him of the opportunity to reply.

“News has already arrived? Who…”

Towards gatekeeper Jack, who was following him, Revlin was speaking when he noticed Yuder and halted in his tracks. Despite the hat he wore low on his brow, he seemed to recognize Yuder instantly.

“You… You’ve come yourself!”

Revlin, who had been about to mention Yuder’s name, swallowed his words with a look of delight. He gestured for Jack to leave, his gaze moving from Yuder to the gatekeeper.

“Jack, I will speak with them for a moment. Please keep watch outside.”

“Understood. But Second Prince might come looking for you, so you must finish as soon as possible.”

“Of course, I know.”

Jack, unable to hide his worried expression as he looked at the resolute Revlin, exited the room.

“Yuder, I didn’t expect to see you again so soon. Did you deliver my message to Duke Peletta? Did he respond? What did he say?”

As soon as the gatekeeper’s presence vanished, Revlin blurted out his questions, his cheeks flushed with excitement.

“That is…”

Yuder struggled with how to convey the fact that Kishiar himself had come directly.

“Did he say he would accept?”

“I relayed the message as instructed. However, the Duke…”

“I came to hear it myself.”

From behind Yuder, Kishiar, in his true form, suddenly stuck out his head. Revlin turned to the new voice, taking in the second person in the room, and gasped audibly.

“Du, Duke Pele…?”

“Shh.”

Kishiar held his finger to his lips, silencing the young boy.

“I heard everything. Quite an interesting conversation.”

“There was no falsehood in what I said.”

Kishiar had indeed come all this way. In almost a single, undivided form. Trembling with a mixture of fear and excitement, Revlin realized this was the best opportunity he could possibly seize.

“There’s no one better informed than I am about the current state of affairs in the Apeto family, or more capable of speaking candidly to you.”

“That is interesting, of course. But that’s not why I came here.”

“What is the reason then?”

A lazy smile briefly flickered at the corners of Kishiar’s mouth, then vanished. Revlin, who had grown accustomed to the fear that his brother Lenore instilled in others and had rarely ever felt

intimidated himself, tensed as he realized that even a smile could carry the sharp edge of a blade.

‘Duke Peletta is not as easy as the rumors suggest. I can’t let my guard down until the deal is done.’

“As far as I know… the youngest son of the Apeto family has been terribly frail since birth, so much so that he struggles even to walk outside of his bed. Yet, you appear quite healthy in front of me. Why is that?”

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Chapter 124

“But why do you, standing before me, seem so healthy?”

That was the first thing Kishiar brought up, something he hadn’t even discussed with Yuder. When Yuder and Revlin both turned to him with surprise, Kishiar gave a slight, apologetic smile.

“I have my suspicions, but I wish to hear it from your lips.”

Revlin’s lips quivered slightly. He hadn’t expected Kishiar would want to hear about that first.

‘But it’s not so different from what I planned to say anyway. It’s okay.’

The boy took a moment, thinking about a precious person trapped, slowly dying without even a sip of water, and once again found his courage.

“You’re…correct. As you’ve said, I’ve had a weak constitution since birth. It wasn’t until about a year and a half ago, after my awakening, that my health improved to what it is now.”

For a moment, Yuder saw a fleeting emotion pass through Kishiar’s red eyes. It disappeared too quickly for him to accurately identify, but he was certain that Kishiar had wanted to hear this answer.

“As I thought.”

Kishiar responded curtly, nodding with a smile.

“Good. Let’s start from the beginning. Whether it’s information or assistance, I’m prepared to listen.”

“I understand. However, as time is short, I’ll try to explain as simply as possible. Is it alright if I send further details with a letter through Jack later?”

“That’s fine.”

Kishiar’s permission was granted. Revlin’s golden eyes looked to the floor. He slowly opened his mouth, recalling a past that felt both very distant and just yesterday.

“As you may know, being a noble with noble blood, in our Apeto family, it’s common for particularly frail children to be born. Just as I was.”

From birth, Revlin had been incredibly weak. Not only was he unable to run around like other children, but he frequently coughed up blood without any discernable cause. Although he was especially weak, it wasn’t surprising, as it was common for children of the Apeto family to be born with such a constitution. His eldest brother, Aishes Shand Apeto, was also weak, often fainting.

In the Apeto family, this phenomenon was referred to as children born with “Blood of Blessing.” However, Revlin always thought that it was more of a curse than a blessing.

The current Duke of Apeto fathered seven children between two deceased wives, but four died in childhood, leaving only three sons alive. Among them, only the second son, Lenore, was in perfect health.

Revlin lived each day waiting for death. There was no happiness in his life. But then, a miracle happened. The power of the Red Stone, said to have fallen from the sky, gave him a strange ability.

Compared to others who could slaughter hordes of monsters with a flick of a finger or spew sword aura, Revlin’s ability was pitifully

insignificant. An ability to transmit his voice to a specific target was of no use, apart from negating the need for whispering.

However, since awakening this ability, Revlin's health gradually improved. The number of days he was not ill increased until, after a few months, he could walk and run properly.

"But how could such a miraculous event occur?" The Duke of Apeto, taken aback, called upon his younger brother Beltrail, one of the twelve senior priests, and for the first time became aware that his youngest son was an Awakener. Ordinarily, this would have been a matter of profound shame. However, Beltrail proposed that Revlin's awakening might have altered his inherent frailty.

Most dismissed this as foolish speculation, yet one person, the second prince Lenore, wished to lend credibility to Beltrail's claim.

"The reason was simple. Lenore desired to usurp the successor position from my eldest brother, Aishes."

If they discovered a method to amend the frailty passed down in the family through this research, Lenore was driven by the ambition that he could potentially claim the position of successor from Aishes. The Duke of Apeto also showed interest in this idea, leading them to initiate research on the Awakeners in the basement of the annex.

"My uncle and brother committed horrible acts there. They sincerely believed that by mixing the blood of an Awakener, they could extract and eliminate the 'Blood of Blessing' of Apeto. Even after a year and a half with no significant success, the research is still ongoing."

Revlin's expression brimmed with disgust as he discussed this part.

"Uncle Beltrail initially wanted to use me as the test subject. However, my father wasn't fond of that idea. That's the only reason I

escaped their experiments.”

Revlin was fearful of his uncle and brother. Lenore, being his elder brother and understanding Revlin’s frailty, provided him with an escort out of a sense of charity, but Revlin felt no gratitude towards him.

“Nion… No, Dandenion was my escort, assigned by Lenore.”

One day, Lenore coincidentally found an Awakener the same age as Revlin, even sharing a birthday, and he assigned him as both a conversation partner and escort for his younger brother. Although Revlin and Dandenion had entirely different statuses and personalities, they shared the same age, birthday, gender, and awakened powers. These small similarities soon made them close friends.

“We were friends at first. But… as we started to rely on each other, our feelings began to change…”

Revlin bit his lip and lowered his head. Even Yuder, who was not particularly interested in his or others’ feelings, could guess what followed. Eventually, Revlin continued to speak as if he had made up his mind.

“I fell in love with Nion first. Nion had repeatedly said no. If I had stopped then, things might have been better… But I was too greedy, and I ended up getting caught by Lenore.”

Lenore was incredulous that a commoner Awakener would dare to have eyes for his noble-blooded younger brother. Dandenion was dragged away and imprisoned in the annex, and Revlin was placed under close watch. That was the end of it.

“Once my brother calms down from his anger, he quickly forgets what he was even angry about. But I couldn’t do that. How could I forget about Nion?”

Revlin had no power to save Nion. The best he could do was to beg the servants to prevent him from dying of starvation in his cell. If no one would save him and Nion, he would have to find another way. He swore he would sell his family name, for which he had never felt a shred of gratitude since birth, if it meant saving his lover.

If you ask me to find evidence of the experiments my uncle and brother conducted, I can certainly do that. But please, save Nion in return. Nion is different from me, he's healthy, kind, and powerful. He is too young to die like this… I believe it's a waste, he implored.

He tried his best to speak calmly, like an adult, but Revlin ended up failing towards the end. Yuder was caught in complex emotions as he watched Revlin weep, his face, usually as pretty as a doll, twisted in anguish.

In his previous life, the seat of the Duke of Apeto had ultimately been taken by the second son, Lenore. The original heir, Aishes, had died suddenly even before Emperor Katchian took the throne, and the previous Duke of Apeto had passed away a few years later. He hadn't heard any stories about the third son, Revlin, but since he never heard of him having any siblings when Lenore became the Duke, it was likely he had died.

While he didn't know about the deaths of others, Aishes's death had caused quite a stir. Even after numerous thorough investigations due to suspicions of foul play, the death was remembered as one with a definitive conclusion of natural causes.

After I became the Commander, I never heard of such horrifying deeds being committed in Apeto. Could it be because the second son, Lenore, who desired the position of the heir, promptly discontinued the fruitless experiments after the first son, Aishes, suddenly died, and he obtained the position of heir without much trouble?

It could be possible if all Lenore wanted was the position of the heir, and everything else was merely a means to that end.

From the beginning, the claim that the blood of Awakeners could alleviate or cure the hereditary frailty of a noble lineage was lunacy.

The Warden of the Apeto family he met in the East said they were gathering Awakeners entering their reproductive period to produce a ‘blessed child’ in Apeto. Considering the absurdity of that story as part of the experiment to achieve their goal that Revlin mentioned, he was genuinely horrified for the first time in a while.

After committing such insane deeds, once he became the Duke of Apeto, he lived the most quietly.

While Yuder was reflecting on his past memories, Revlin managed to suppress his emotions and lifted his head. His clear golden eyes stared directly at Kishiar and Yuder alternately.

I apologize. Some dust got into my eyes. But I think this should be enough for you to surmise the situation.

Revlin, who held back his emotions and raised his chin with dignity as if he hadn’t been crying, clearly showed his prideful nature, not wanting to elicit sympathy at a negotiation table due to his youth.

I will provide any additional information you might need, as long as you point out what you deem necessary.

Now, the ball was back in Kishiar’s court. Yuder briefly observed Kishiar’s expression, which was hard to read.

“So, you’re not trying to provoke sympathy, but rather you strictly seek help in exchange for information. May I ask why?”

The first words that Kishiar finally spat out seemed to directly attack Revlin, who had just managed to regain his composure.

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A tremor flitted across the corner of Revlin’s eyes, but the boy quickly let out a single sigh, clenched his fists tightly, and began to speak.

“I believe that help provided out of pity is only temporary. However, if the help you’re providing is in exchange for useful information I’ve provided, that would undoubtedly be far superior. And also…”

Revlin’s voice trailed off, and he paused to gather his thoughts before continuing.

“I’ve heard that you, Duke, personally select and greatly cherish your Cavalry members. Yet, my brother and uncle still desire to have those Cavalry members in their grasp so they can captivate them and use them for experiments… if I were crying while providing such information, how much would you be able to trust me?”

“Certainly, there’s truth to that.”

Kishiar agreed coolly.

“I do not want my observations and judgments to be doubted just because I am young and frail.”

Even if it seemed futile, he believed it was the best course of action to save his loved ones. Upon seeing Revlin’s desperate and earnest gaze, Yuder had a strange sense of dj vu.

It felt like he had once faced such a gaze a long time ago, in a past so distant he couldn’t recall. But who could possibly aim such a gaze at him?

It was absurd. The fleeting dj vu faded away soon.

“Very well. Let’s confirm one last thing. Would you really do anything to save your loved ones?”

To Kishiar’s question, Revlin responded firmly.

“Yes.”

“Even if it means confronting your terrifying brother, or your uncle or father directly?”

“If necessary… I will. Although, I doubt I would be much help.”

A sense of gravity draped over the boy’s pale face.

“I hope you stick to your word, your resolve. That’s the only way we can proceed with our plan.”

With that, Kishiar’s words signaled the formal completion of their agreement. The tension released from Revlin all at once, and he gasped for air momentarily, swaying before he steadied himself against a wall.

“Thank you. Once everything is over, I promise to repay this favor, no matter what happens.”

“How about focusing on what’s coming up next, rather than promising for an uncertain future?”

“Pardon?”

Revlin, who had been bowing his head in confusion, looked up with wide eyes. Kishiar gave him a gentle smile.

“Surely the Apeto family’s children won’t just attend today’s grand worship and then do nothing for the rest of the festival. What event do you plan on attending next?”

At this, Revlin, who seemed to have guessed something, began counting on his fingers, muttering something under his breath.

“I don’t have a clear schedule like my brothers do. But if I were to go out next… I’m likely to attend the Sharing of the Sacred Flame event, held in front of the Imperial Palace the day after tomorrow.”

“The Sharing of the Sacred Flame event… I see. Since it’s an event that usually has the attendance of young nobles in their late teens, the likelihood is high indeed.”

Kishiar appeared to instantly recall what the event was upon hearing its name, while Yuder had to rummage through a myriad of names in his head before he vaguely remembered.

‘It was a ceremony where flowers, carefully cultivated in the shrine throughout the year, were fairly distributed to everyone by the hands of young nobles…I thought only a select few devout followers could participate. So, it seems there’s no problem attending even if one hasn’t decided in advance.’

“The head of the ceremony is Uncle Beltrail. The Apeto family has produced many priests of the Sun God for generations and supports and attends almost all shrine events. The Sharing of the Sacred Flame ceremony doesn’t require complex rituals, so my brother Lenore mentioned that he was considering allowing me to attend alone.”

“That’s good.”

What exactly was good remained unclear, but Kishiar’s crimson eyes sparkled with more energy than ever before. A moment later, he lightly rubbed his chin, a smirk tugging at the corner of his lips as he asked Revlin another question.

“Revlin, can you act?”

“Act…Sir?”

“Yes. It seems we might have to put on a play that day.”

The boy blinked his eyes in surprise and opened his mouth. Yuder, too, was equally baffled.

The following day, Yuder switched his schedule with one of his subordinates, who was originally supposed to assist in maintaining peace during the Sharing of the Sacred Flame ceremony. The sudden change did not seem to bother the subordinates. They had become accustomed to following Yuder’s instructions during the preparation of the festival.

“Hey, Yuder! Not going on patrol today?”

Unlike when he would go out for patrols, Yuder was now leisurely walking down the corridor in his uniform, prompting familiar faces to greet him. Among them were some who had found reasons to pick fights with him in his past life. Yuder nodded, feeling a new sense of unfamiliarity.

“Yeah.”

“Good. You need to rest at least a day. How can one work every single day?”

“Going to see the Commander? Take care!”

As the Harvest Festival drew to a close, the Cavalry members had gained unprecedented confidence. They had managed to prevent minor and major accidents and misdemeanors during the event with near perfection.

No matter how much the Imperial Knights and Imperial Mages, who shared the responsibility of maintaining peace with the Cavalry,

belittled or guarded against them, it was of no use. The deeply rooted confidence wasn't so easily broken.

Everyone knew that the festival's success was largely due to Kishiar and Yuder's efforts. Especially Yuder, who attended more events than anyone else in Kishiar's stead when the latter often had to step out due to imperial family engagements. He would appear out of nowhere like a ghost whenever an accident was about to happen and salvage the situation, thereby earning an unprecedented level of trust and faith.

What could be more reassuring than knowing there was someone who could handle any situation, no matter what happened? All Yuder had done was try to prevent potential accidents that the members might encounter based on his experiences from his previous life, but the outcome had changed far more significantly than he had anticipated.

Now, there was no one in the Cavalry who envied or was wary of his strength. Regardless of whether they were close to Yuder or not, everyone had come to trust him. Who could feel competitive against someone so strong and seasoned that it would be considered rude to even compare one's abilities to his?

Jealousy and competitiveness were typically felt towards someone within arm's reach. It was unusual to feel envious of someone who had been standing aloofly high up from the very beginning.

"Commander. I'm coming in."

Unaware of how his position had changed within the unit, Yuder opened the door to Kishiar's office. A warm and fragrant scent wafted from the sunlit window.

While other nobles would still be asleep at this time, Kishiar was already reading a letter, perfectly dressed in his Commander's

uniform, a steaming cup of tea by his side.

“Is that a letter from Revlin Shand Apeto?”

“Yes. It seems he wrote down the points we requested overnight and sent them. Quite swift.”

Kishiar lightly showed the seal stamped on the back of the letter. It matched exactly the pattern on the ring that Revlin had shown as proof of his identity the previous night.

Before leaving the Apeto house last night, Kishiar had requested several pieces of information from Revlin. This included the layout of the Apeto mansion, matters related to Dandenion who they had to rescue, and lastly, personal information about his uncle, Elder Priest Beltrail Shand Apeto.

Considering how quickly Revlin had compiled all the information overnight, one could feel how desperately he had been moving.

“So, have you finished reassigning the event participation personnel?”

“Yes.”

As Kishiar flipped through the letter, Yuder quietly opened his mouth.

“Including me, there will be two from Shin, two Sul, and one Jung, a total of five people participating as security officers at the Sharing of the Sacred Flame ceremony tomorrow.”

“Any who protested or seemed suspicious about the changes?”

“None.”

“Well done.”

Kishiar lightly responded and began to read the last page of the letter. Yuder hesitated for a moment while watching him and then opened his mouth.

“Can you now tell me what kind of play we’ll be putting on tomorrow?”

Last night, Kishiar did not give a detailed explanation about the play he intended to put on. He only said he would tell him once he had reassigned the event personnel and received contact from Revlin.

But now, all those tasks were completed. It was time to hear the answer.

Yuder quietly stood waiting for quite a while until Kishiar finished reading the entire letter, folded it in half, and looked up at him.

“Let’s have a cup of tea together and talk. Sit over there.”

Although Yuder pointed out that there was no need to drink tea if the purpose was just to talk, it was futile. Moments later, he had to endure feeling slightly like he was sitting on pins and needles as he watched Kishiar pouring tea with a pleased expression.

“There’s no need for such a burdensome expression, it’s just a play, literally. Revlin, you, and I will just have to speak our lines and move according to the script.”

After setting down a cup of tea in front of Yuder, Kishiar also placed a plate with as many as five pieces of cream cake.

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“What…what is it?”

“It’s called ‘The Hidden Dream of the Youngest Prince of Apeto.’ All those attending tomorrow’s Sharing of the Sacred Flame ceremony will be the audience. The special guest will be none other than Beltrail Shand Apeto, one of the twelve high priests and a respected authority on Awakeners.”

“No, I’m talking about this cake. Where on earth did you get it?”

Despite hearing Yuder’s shaky question, Kishiar elegantly placed a silver fork in front of him, continuing the conversation as if he hadn’t heard the question.

“The script goes like this. A fragile-looking noble boy manages to solve an unexpected accident at a small event with the help of Cavalry members. Others fail to recognize his abilities, but the Cavalry Commander, who happened to be nearby, realizes this and praises them.”

Kishiar pointed at himself with a smile. At this point, Yuder decided to give up on getting an answer about the cake and picked up his fork.

“When asked what he wanted as a reward, the noble boy requests to join the Cavalry. The Commander, touched by his passionate desire, immediately appoints him as a temporary member. Then, the boy’s relative, a high priest in charge of the event, sees this and is deeply movedleading to the climax.”

His long finger, which had been lightly waving in the air like a conductor, stopped precisely as he finished speaking.

“How about that? Seems like an interesting story, doesn’t it?”

“Well, all right, but how are you going to make people believe that the Commander just happened to be nearby?”

“No need to worry about that. As it happens, my schedule for tomorrow has me passing by that area.”

Kishiar smirked like a mischievous boy hatching a prank.

“I’ll be guiding the envoys from the west through the Hill of Abundance. The beautiful hill where the Archmage Luma himself planted an apple tree.”

‘The Hill of Abundance…’

That hill conveniently overlooked the grand palaceit was in the best position for such a view. Upon hearing Kishiar mention the Sharing of the Sacred Flame ceremony, Yuder felt a growing sense of understanding of the previously puzzling expression on Kishiar’s face.

“As the Duke of Peletta, and also the Cavalry Commander, who would dare find it odd if I rushed to the scene of a sudden accident right before my eyes?”

“I see.”

Yuder’s tongue tingled from the sweetness of the hastily bitten cake.

“So you plan to make a big scene to attract attention, change the perceptions of the noble Awakener, and then issue a rescue mission for Dandenion?”

“You’re close.”

Kishiar shook his head as if it was a shame.

“If there was only one person to rescue, that would be it. But we’re not rescuing just one person, are we?”

We’re not rescuing just one person. There could only be one meaning to those words. The fork that Yuder had been nonchalantly using to cut the cake came to a sudden halt.

“You can’t mean…”

“Let’s see.”

Kishiar pulled out one of the letters he had been holding and placed it in front of Yuder. It was a roughly drawn map, noting the position of each building within the Apeto family estate. Despite the crudity of the drawing, presumably due to it being handmade, the information was surprisingly easy to decipher. Yuder read the small note written inside one of the outbuildings on the map.

‘Suspected Awakeners currently detained. Approximately 20 in number.’

“How do you plan on getting all 20 of them out?”

“There’s no need for us to escort them out. If things escalate, they will naturally find their way out.”

Kishiar pointed at a section on the map. It was the name of Revlin marked inside the main building, indicating his room.

“The Apeto family would prevent Revlin from joining the Cavalry, but the Cavalry Commander has the right to protect and meet his troops above all. I plan to make full use of that right and request to meet my temporary member, Revlin.”

It was a festival period, when the attention of the entire continent was focused here. No matter how powerful the Apeto family was,

they couldn’t easily dismiss Kishiar, especially considering the amount of controversy surrounding the Cavalry.

“And then what do they do?”

While Yuder made these predictions, Kishiar’s finger smoothly moved across the map, leaving the main building.

“Would they not think that they should move them beforehand, in case I visit and discover something more troublesome and escalate the situation?”

His finger, tracing a dotted line representing the underground passage for food storage and transport between the outbuildings, the main building, and the exterior, finally stopped near a forest at the edge of the vast estate owned by the Apeto family.

“Once they escape from the outbuildings, then… it’s over.”

“…”

Yuder, who had been focusing on Kishiar’s fingertips with all his nerves, forgetting even to eat his cake, finally let out the breath he’d been holding. It was a truly audacious plan. It was unbelievable how he had come up with this from just a brief conversation with Revlin yesterday.

‘Even if I were in the Apeto family’s position, I wouldn’t think of moving any other way.’

Kishiar had turned the disadvantages of the festival period, which might seem unfavorable for planning such a thing, into opportunities.

No matter how much he thought about it, there was no better plan. Yuder felt an unbearable shame at his own shortsightedness, which had only considered the difficulty of saving Dandenion and

hadn’t even taken into account the possibility of rescuing other Awakeners.

‘If I were the leader when this happened, I wouldn’t have been able to act as boldly.’

He had boasted of saving the world, but died anyway. In the end, the limit of Yuder Aile was just that. Despite living over 10 years longer than the current Kishiar, he had achieved nothing better.

Perhaps it was Kishiar, who seemed so naturally intent on saving everyone, who was truly capable of saving the world.

If he had survived in his previous life, perhaps

The moment he reached that thought, he felt a sharp, small pinch deep within his chest, as though pricked by a long needle. Kishiar, watching Yuder’s blank gaze on his face, smiled slightly.

“What is it? That look on your face. Ha-ha. Are you taken aback by my ingenious scheming?”

“I… I was merely thinking how truly remarkable you are.”

Hearing Yuder’s dry murmur, the playfulness that had filled Kishiar’s face subtly faded away.

“Is that sarcasm? Because even I would feel a bit embarrassed if it wasn’t.”

“It’s sincere.”

Kishiar was unusually slow to respond. It seemed as if he hadn’t expected Yuder to speak so honestly, and there was a hint of surprise. But he slowly closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, he showed a smile that was as usual.

“It’s still just a plan at this stage. The most important part of this plan is the person who will carry out the rescue mission towards the annex while Revelin and I distract the attention of the Apeto family.”

And he intended that person to be Yuder. It was palpable from the look in his eyes.

“Given the circumstances, I can only ask you to exercise your abilities as much as you can without overdoing it.”

“I am up to the task. Trust me.”

No matter what else was hidden within that vast noble house, Yuder had resolved to make this mission a success. He was probably the only one in the world capable of perfectly completing this dangerous task.

“You always say that, but then you come back seriously injured.”

However, Kishiar couldn’t hide his disbelief even in the face of Yuder’s resolute reply. Yuder had no confidence in promising he wouldn’t get hurt and avoided Kishiar’s gaze.

“…it’s alright if I get treatment.”

“Is it alright? Is that truly how you feel?”

A scoff escaped from Kishiar’s lips.

“It seems you’ve already forgotten about that time you spent half a day receiving treatment. Is that why you say such things?”

Automatically, the painfully vivid memory of that day flashed across Yuder’s mind. Even the mere memory of it made his shoulders feel as if they were tightening, but he strived to push the sensation to the back of his mind.

“No, there are many cases in the world where even when people are seriously injured, they cannot receive proper treatment. Compared to them, at least I can return and be healed by you, Commander, so it’s okay.”

“…Is that a calculated statement?”

“Pardon?”

Yuder, averting his gaze, found Kishiar glaring back at him with a frustrated expression that left him at a loss for words. It was an intensely unfamiliar expression that caught him off guard.

“What do you mean I’ve calculated…”

“Never mind. You don’t need to answer.”

Kishiar, abruptly raising his hand, opened his mouth several times as if to say something, only to close it again. An odd silence filled the space between them, a divergence from the usual atmosphere they shared. When the silence settled, the scent of the cake and the aroma of the tea became remarkably distinct, lending a slightly odd sensation to the room.

“Did I perhaps say something…”

“This mission has the characteristic of needing to strike and retreat quickly, so forming a team and receiving external support will be difficult. The more people we have, the harder it becomes to move swiftly, and the likelihood of being caught increases. It can’t be helped. However, I will devise a plan using every possible means to minimize the parts where you have to act alone.”

He wanted to ask if he had said something wrong, but as soon as he opened his mouth, Kishiar started explaining so quickly that he couldn’t finish his thought.

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“…Understood.”

“For now, it seems too early to go into further detail. I’ll inform you once things are more settled.”

“Yes.”

Yuder realized that the conversation had reached its end, and he gently placed his fork on the now empty cake plate. A faint smile played on Kishiar’s face.

“You cleaned your plate… You must really like sweets, huh?”

“I’ve told you before, I neither particularly like nor dislike them.”

Although his comment wasn’t particularly funny, Kishiar, for some reason, held back a chuckle with pursed lips.

“Understood. You may go now.”

“Yes.”

Not long after Yuder had left the office, Nathan Zuckerman entered, almost as if taking turns. The object he handed to Kishiar was a report and a letter sealed by a special method.

“Where did these come from?”

“There are two internal reports from the Imperial Army, one letter from Hartan, and on top of them, a letter from Peletta Castle.”

Kishiar effortlessly broke the seal and skimmed through all the documents in a moment.

The news that higher-ups were starting to be vigilant due to the newly awakened common soldiers in the Imperial Army, the reports of those diligently working for the development of the domain even in the absence of the Duke, and the actions of his loyal Knights of Peletta across the continent, all this was written in those few pieces of paper.

“Everyone’s doing well. Now that it’s certain that neither Diarca nor Apeto noticed what happened in Hartan, we can hold off for a while. Nathan, you’ve done well.”

“Deception, isn’t that what we always do?”

With a light reply, Nathan turned his gaze towards the empty cake plate and the extra tea cup in front of Kishiar.

“I see that Yuder Aile was here just a moment ago.”

“Yes. It seems we need to establish a dedicated medical system for the Cavalry soon.”

“Has he been injured again?”

As Nathan’s face, who had been with Yuder when he was being treated in the office all day, suggested that he knew something, Kishiar gave a slightly bitter smile.

“No, he’s not hurt now, but I have a feeling he will be soon.”

“You are a person with abilities and patience far beyond ordinary people. Don’t you think you’re worrying too much?”

“How can I let down someone who’s so certain I will take care of it?”

“Excuse me?”

As Nathan Zuckerman failed to grasp the quiet words, Kishiar shook his head with a smile, as if it was nothing.

“It’s nothing. Just do what needs to be done as quickly as possible.”

Understanding Kishiar had never been an easy task, but now, somehow, it felt even harder than usual. Nathan sighed briefly and nodded.

“Understood. I will scout for doctors and pharmacists as quickly as possible. Finding a discreet priest will probably take more time, so it would be best to bring in who we can find first. I’ll also get more holy water and purifying stones.”

“Good. And one more thing…”

Kishiar nodded, then added another task to the agenda.

“Along with that, start the construction of a medical room on the first floor where we can take care of people immediately when needed. It would be even better if we could fit about 30 beds.”

“Haven’t you said that you’d consider making that after we have a few more members with healing abilities?”

Nathan Zuckerman tilted his head in a questioning manner.

“If we wait to make it until we actually need it, it might be too late. And beds can be used not just for the sick, but also for various isolations when needed. There’s no harm in being prepared.”

Just as Nathan suggested, Kishiar had initially thought that it would be sufficient to establish facilities like a medical room or beds only after several members within the Cavalry had awakened healing abilities. He had judged that there was no need to create these facilities in advance, considering that one holy water or purification

stone brought from the temple could heal people faster than doctors or pharmacists.

However, his thinking changed slightly after seeing multiple people coming and going from the private quarters due to the lack of a separate isolation space when the second gender manifestation of Jimmy Ocker occurred recently.

The bodies of the Awakeners are different from those of ordinary people. Kishiar himself did not yet fully understand the changes to his own body after awakening, let alone others. He speculated that the need for specialized medical care for the Awakeners would be raised even years from now.

“Understood.”

Even though he didn’t fully grasp or accept the implications of his words, the loyal adjutant would follow his command more faithfully than anyone else. As he thought about the Cavalry that would change even more in the future, Kishiar’s gaze suddenly fell on the empty cake plate.

“Why are you laughing all of a sudden?”

“No, it’s just… I felt like laughing.”

Despite sensing Nathan’s gaze on him with confusion, he couldn’t help but chuckle. Kishiar gave a slight shrug and laughed for a while.

It had been a long time since he laughed at a purely amusing memory.

“I can’t figure out what the Elder priest thinks of this significant event. When did he confirm the participants, and how can he so casually increase the number of them a day before?”

The novice Priest Lusan, who was selected to assist in today's Sharing of the Sacred Flame event, was eavesdropping on the conversation of the priests who were grumbling in front of him while pretending to clean the floor. He had been curious because there had been a bewildered atmosphere among the priests since last night, and it seemed that the sudden increase in event participants was the cause.

"Is he going to overturn a matter settled half a year ago just like that? Is he saying to change all the flowers we have grown because he doesn't like them?…. And we've been tolerating all of this, but now he's asking us to prepare a seat for the young master of the noble house! I'm really so angry that I can't live."

"Is this kind of thing happening only once or twice? It's not just him, all those from powerful families are like that. Considering the amount of offerings that the Apeto family gives to the representative shrine, we just have to endure and manage it."

"What does family matter to a priest who has pledged his body and soul to God?"

For a while now, Lusan had suffered at their hands, ostensibly preparing for the Sharing of the Sacred Flame ceremony. Their anger was rather gratifying to him, but he made sure not to show it outwardly.

'They badmouthed me, saying a lazy person like you can never become a formal priest, yet when the Elder Priest, who never shows his face, speaks, they don't dare move an inch. Pathetic, just pathetic.'

According to the sacred texts, priests serving the Sun God were required to sever ties with the secular world. But now, there were hardly any who kept this rule. Unless one was an orphan like Lusan, abandoned at the temple's doorstep, the position one could ascend

to and the right to speak often changed depending on how distinguished their family was.

These priests, who saw themselves as victims and accused the Elder Priest of misusing the power of his family, probably had no idea how much they had ignored and excluded Lusan simply because he was an orphan. To Lusan's eyes, there was no difference between the Elder Priest and them.

"Lusan! How long are you going to keep sweeping the same area? Stop being lazy and go help with the sacred flame!"

Perhaps his eavesdropping had been too obvious, having stayed in one place for too long. One of the older priests turned his head and scowled. Lusan hurriedly grabbed the broom and fled, giving a barely sincere response.

"Ah, yes, yes."

"What kind of answer is that, you useless kid! You should be grateful for receiving mercy and making it to the altar as an orphan. What's wrong with that kid!"

'Who are you to call someone useless when your divine power is even lower than mine?'

Lusan transferred the mound of sacred flames he had painstakingly grown for a year, and tidied the stage and tables where the nobles' children participating in the ceremony would stand.

'Priests like me did everything from growing to harvesting the flowers and preparing them by removing the thorns, but the nobles' children are the ones who stand here and distribute them. Who on earth came up with such a meaningless ceremony?'

The expressions of the other acolyte priests working beside her all looked unsatisfied. It was astonishing that such a ceremony,

where no one seemed happy, had continued for hundreds of years under the guise of tradition.

“The participants will arrive soon. Finish up and come down.”

As soon as the preparations were completed, the noble participants emerged as if they had been waiting. Those attending the Sharing of the Sacred Flame ceremony were all nobles’ children, each with beautiful appearances and hands that clearly never did any dirty work. Among them, a young boy with beautiful red hair, looking like a doll, was said to be the youngest of Duke Apeto, who had suddenly decided to participate in the ceremony and enraged the priests.

The acolyte priests, including Lusan, had to help the nobles’ children put white priest capes over their clothes. Lusan was in charge of the youngest Apeto. As Lusan draped the cape over his shoulders and was about to tie the string, he was startled to notice that the boy’s forehead and neck were drenched in cold sweat.

‘That’s unexpected. Even a young lord like him gets nervous when attending such an event.’

Startled, he paused, but there were tasks to be done. As he tied the string, Lusan noticed not only the cold sweat of the youngest Apeto but also his tightly clenched fist shaking, which almost made him laugh.

“…If you’re not feeling well, please let me know. I can imbue you with divine power right now.”

The young noble, who had only seemed annoying, felt like the orphaned younger siblings she took care of at.

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In a whisper so quiet that the others could not hear, Lusan spoke to the youngest Apeto. The boy's golden eyes widened just a slight.

"It's… okay."

"It's not widely known, but divine power is not only effective for wounds, but also for excessive tension."

"What?"

At that comment, the boy eased his stiff expression a bit, and his lips curved up as if to smile. Lusan did not miss that moment and slightly released his divine power, letting it flow into the boy's body. The bright sunlight pouring down on the plaza in front of the shrine concealed the light emitted by the divine power, preventing anyone from realizing what they were doing.

After a short while, color returned to the boy's pale cheeks. Lusan took his hands away, pretending that she had finished tying the string. It was so natural, even she had to admit it was admirable.

"It's done now."

"…Thank you."

Surprised by the unexpected words of gratitude, Lusan was taken aback.

"I will repay this kindness you've shown me. Thank you so much."

'Huh?'

"Lusan!"

Just then, an older priest yelled towards Lusan, who was still standing at the front even after the other novice priests had retreated. Lusan had to step back hastily, unable to respond to the words he had just heard.

‘But… I could swear he didn’t move his lips when he spoke those words… Was I mistaken?’

The shrine’s front was crowded with people thronging to receive the sacred flame. The sacred flame ‘Glin’ was the only one in the world imbued with divine power, and just by keeping it in a room, one could somewhat experience its healing effects.

In the past, there were instances when overexcited poor commoners, desperate for this golden opportunity, had spoiled the ceremony, but now such worries were absent thanks to those dispatched to maintain peace.

“Lusan, look over there. Not just the Imperial Troops, people from the Cavalry have come this year. See the black uniforms?”

A fellow priest standing beside Lusan whispered. Indeed, there were a few unfamiliar faces dressed in black uniforms mixed among the Imperial Troops. Lusan, having heard the rumors in the capital, already knew what the Cavalry was.

‘Are those people the Awakeners?’

Despite their small number, only five in total, they all looked incredibly daunting and powerful. Their various weapons made them look even more formidable. Those who had come to receive the sacred flame seemed to feel the same way, as their demeanor when climbing the stage to receive the flame was much more subdued and careful than the previous year.

“The senior priest has arrived.”

The ceremony's responsible senior priest, Beltrail Shand Apeto, revealed himself later than anyone else. Having put the attendees to work preparing the ceremony, and then sitting down without a word of praise, he closed his eyes with a slightly tired look.

'It's better than someone who doesn't help at all and shows up late just to complain about the preparations, but that attitude isn't good either.'

The priests' expressions hardened in unison, as if angered by his arrogant demeanor. Naturally, Lusan thought of the boy from the Apeto family he had helped earlier. The two were unmistakably from the same lineage, but the aura they gave off was entirely different. Undoubtedly, the boy had traits uncharacteristic of a typical noble.

'How could they be so different? Is it because I have no family?'

Regardless of what everyone was thinking, the ceremony of Sharing of the Sacred Flame proceeded as planned. It was a simple ceremony where all that was required was the handing out of the flowers, without the need for any special powers, memorized prayers, or a sequence of rituals.

However, when about half of the flowers had been distributed, an unexpected incident occurred.

Screeeeech!

"Ah!"

"What, what's happening?"

Suddenly, a piercing sound that could shatter eardrums resonated across the entire square. The shockingly loud noise, its origin unclear, temporarily caused deafness and dizziness. Lusan, instinctively covering his ears, harnessed his divine power to protect

himself. The warm light of divine power enveloped his body, helping him regain a portion of his senses and lessen the vertigo.

“…”

The scene reflected in her eyes was pure chaos. The previously peaceful ceremony had vanished within moments. People clutching their ears fell down all over, screaming, but Lusan couldn’t hear a thing. The screeching sound was so loud that even the screams from right beside him were inaudible.

‘What on earth is happening?’

Lusan looked around in confusion. Some of his fellow priests who were beside him were writhing on the ground with their hands over their ears, while others ran for the sanctuary. The nobles on the stage who had been handing out the flowers were mostly on the ground, crying and screaming inaudibly.

‘If only I could find out where this damned noise is coming from!’

No matter how much he looked around, he couldn’t find the source of the sound.

‘Oh dear God, please……’

As he staggered, someone grabbed his arm, supporting him and preventing him from falling.

“Th, thank……”

Murmuring words that couldn’t be heard, Lusan lifted his head and found himself looking at a man dressed in black.

‘The Cavalry?’

The man, with his black uniform, black hair, and black gloves, looked as if he had emerged from the darkness of the night, instantly

capturing people’s attention despite the chaotic situation.

The man frowned as Lusan gaped at him, opened his mouth, and said something, but of course, Lusan couldn’t hear anything.

“I can’t understand what you’re saying!”

“…”

The man opened his mouth again, this time enunciating clearly and slowly so Lusan could read his lips.

‘Where is the Elder Priest?’

Ah. Only then did Lusan realize that the one who should take responsibility for this situation was the Elder Priest, and he turned her head. However, the spot where the Elder Priest had been sitting just a moment ago was now empty.

‘He was there a moment ago… Don’t tell me he fled leaving everyone behind?’

He was taken aback, but he had to respond to the man from the Cavalry. While he was panting heavily, Lusan, pointing towards the now-empty seat with gestures, was gratefully noted by the man from the Cavalry, who seemed to understand his intention. Despite the noise tearing through his ears and giving him a headache, the man maintained a surprising calm.

‘How could he be so unaffected? It didn’t seem like he was deaf.’

Then, it happened.

A thin voice suddenly intruded into Lusan’s mind.

The offering box!

“Eh?”

Lusan unconsciously replied, raising his head. However, his voice was not heard, and the noise was still persistent. He thought he might be hallucinating, but when he saw the man from the Cavalry next to him, he realized it was not an illusion. In the direction he was looking at was a single noble boy who, despite swaying, stood alone on the stage from which everyone had fled.

The boy from the Apeto family looked at Lusan, the man from the Cavalry, and the remaining people while he covered his ears in agony and moved his lips.

At first, I heard a small explosion from the offering box!

If anyone can hear this voice, please go there, quickly

Lusan had never seen ‘Awakeners’ using their abilities in person in his life. It was a hard sight to come by in the temple where he was born and raised.

However, he knew this voice was indeed the strange ability he had only heard of. It was completely different from the sensation he felt when he saw the magic of mages a few times. It was a very strange feeling that couldn’t be described in words.

Others seemed to have the same thought as Lusan. Despite their pain, they looked at the boy on the stage with vacant faces.

And then Lusan came to his senses when he felt the gloved hand holding his arm fall away. The black-haired man from the Cavalry was running towards the purple-clothed offering box, drawing his sword.

‘Ah right. He said something about the offering box!’

What could be inside that made him rush toward it without hesitation? Surprised, Lusan ran after him, but the man had reached the offering box with an unbelievably quick speed.

“Wait!”

In the midst of the ear-piercing noise, the man struck the offering box with his sword. Lusan unconsciously closed his eyes and screamed.

“No! Uh Uhh?

…

“Ah

Incredibly, as soon as the offering box was split in two, the noise stopped abruptly. Lusan, who was hearing his own scream, had to awkwardly shut his mouth.

Other people who were covering their ears and crouching also raised their heads in surprise at the sudden absence of the sound. The man from the Cavalry, seemingly oblivious to the attention on him, bent down calmly and began to rummage through the broken offering box.

After a while, he pulled out a red magic stone with traces of gold from the debris. While everyone was watching his movements, barely able to breathe, the sound of someone frantically riding a horse came from not too far away.

…What’s happening here?

A man beautiful enough to be deserving of the descriptor ‘an incarnation of the Sun God’, looked around at the chaos that the plaza had become, his face creased in a frown. Lusan had seen him a few days earlier during the grand worship service. He was none other than Duke Peletta, Kishiar La Orr.

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Chapter 129

“Commander.”

The man who had shattered the offering box directed his words toward Duke Peletta, his mere presence enough to bring an overwhelming silence to the entire plaza. The people swallowed hard, only then truly remembering that Duke Peletta was also the commander of the Cavalry.

“There’s been a sudden accident, but with the help of another Awakener, we found the cause and managed it quickly.”

“An accident?”

“Inside the offering box… this was found.”

The Duke’s face hardened as he took a magic stone from the black-haired man. Despite knowing that the Duke’s icy gaze was not directed at him, Lusan couldn’t help but shudder for a moment.

“Any casualties?”

“None.”

“There must be a responsible party here. Where is the event manager?”

“Father Bertrail Shand Apeto, who is in charge… coincidentally seems to have left his seat just after the incident.”

Though he said the priest had left his seat, everyone there knew it meant he had fled. The atmosphere grew even darker in an instant.

“I see… what a pity.”

As Kishiar muttered these words looking at the vacant seat of the elder priest, a flurry of people came running from behind him. They were officers of the Imperial Army bearing golden insignia, soldiers under their command, and envoys from other countries.

“Duke! Are you alright?”

“We told you it’s dangerous to go ahead…!”

Despite the fact that common followers who came to receive flowers, priests and priestesses like Lusan, and even ordinary imperial soldiers who were dispatched to help maintain order were still lying here and there, the officers’ gazes were not directed at them. Seeing the officers in a flurry of concern for Kishiar’s well-being, Lusan sighed.

‘Well, I didn’t expect much anyway…’

Lusan and others alike looked around with similarly bitter expressions. After all, there were no injuries or deaths despite the accident, which was a relief. But Kishiar’s response was different.

“The incident has already been resolved by the Cavalry. Shouldn’t we prioritize helping those in need rather than me, who is not even slightly injured?”

“Ah, yes? Oh. Yes, you’re right.”

One officer, surprised by the unexpected words, finally heeded Kishiar’s hint and turned to shout at the soldiers who had followed him.

“You fools. What are you doing? How do you think the Duke will feel if you just stand around doing nothing? Get the fallen people back on their feet and transport the injured now!”

The way he seemed to place all the blame on the foolish soldiers, as if none of it was his fault, was almost laughably blatant. Lusan, seeing the soldiers scattering across the square with anxious faces reminiscent of his own when the old priests would scold him, finally managed to relax.

“So… this was inside the offering box?”

“Yes.”

“That’s quite a serious prank. Who’s the Awakener that let us know this was here? I’d like to see their face.”

While the soldiers were aiding the people, Kishiar didn’t rest for a moment. He examined the red magic stone proffered by a man from the Cavalry with jet-black hair, holding it up to the sunlight before moving himself to gather more details about the situation.

“That person over there.”

Upon seeing the boy from the Apeto family pointed out by the black-haired man, Kishiar nodded and ordered him to be brought closer. Despite being weakened to the point of collapse, the boy hadn’t fainted and was able to come before Kishiar with the support of two soldiers. Kishiar eyed the white cape draped over the boy, his crimson eyes narrowing in intrigue as he began to speak.

“I had no idea that the one who assisted us was a participant in the event. From which family do you hail?”

“Apeto family… my name is Revlin Shand Apeto.”

The boy bowed respectfully before the Duke, his face pale.

“I am aware that you need rest immediately, but I need to understand the situation clearly. May I ask you a few questions?”

“Of course.”

“What is your relationship with Bertrail Shand Apeto, the elder in charge of this event?”

“He’s my uncle.”

There was a ripple of surprise as everyone realized that the person who had helped resolve the incident was the nephew of the elder who had abandoned everyone to save only himself.

“I see. My men mentioned you exerted the power of an Awakener to aid us. Is this true?”

Revlin hesitated for a moment, unable to answer as promptly as before. But soon, he nodded with a firm expression, as if making a decision.

“Yes. That’s correct. I’m an Awakener.”

“Well, well. In a noble family…”

Whispers spread rapidly throughout the square, with all eyes converging on Kishiar and Revlin.

“Interesting. What exactly are your abilities?”

“It’s nothing impressive that you’d be curious about, Your Grace. I just have the ability to project my voice directly into others’ minds…”

Upon hearing Revlin’s modest reply, Lusan realized his earlier perception wasn’t mistaken.

“The ability to project your voice. So that’s how you were able to communicate amidst such noise.”

Kishiar nodded and gave the boy’s shoulder a light pat.

“That’s an impressive ability. Do not demean yourself. Without that power, many more would have been injured.”

“Th-thank you.”

Revlin testified that during the Sharing of the Sacred Flame, a small explosion was heard from the direction of the offering box, followed by a terrible noise.

The offering box was set up a little distance from the podium, allowing those who came for the flowers to freely donate. As it happened, Revlin was nearest to the offering box at that time, so no one doubted his explanation. Lusan was no exception.

“Commander, we’ve checked the condition of everyone remaining. Apart from a few who fainted from shock, everyone is in good enough shape to walk on their own.”

Just then, the rest of the Cavalry, who had moved to inspect the fallen ones before the Imperial soldiers, returned and reported loudly to Kishiar so everyone could hear.

“Is there anyone who has suffered hearing damage?”

“Yes. My hearing was restored immediately after the sound ceased, and there were no after-effects.”

“That’s fortunate.”

Kishiar nodded in response to the report, and at the same time, someone sprang to their feet and began to shout.

“The Cavalry has saved us all once again! Long live the Cavalry! Long live His Grace, Duke Peletta!”

It reminded everyone of the day of the grand procession on the first day of the festival. All the residents of the capital still vividly

remembered the intruders that the Cavalry had slain that day. Presumably, the one shouting out praises was recalling that very incident. As they repeated their cheers, others began to join in with the cheering, as if drawn in by their enthusiasm.

“Hurray! Long live!”

“Duke Peletta truly is the glory of the Empire!”

Among the crowd, a minority began shouting out the names of Revlin Shand Apeto, clapping their hands. The name Apeto, which had almost earned their disapproval due to the escape of the elder priest, was fortunately not tarnished, thanks to Revlin.

Those who had received the sacred flame threw their flowers unreservedly at Revlin, Kishiar, and the members of the Cavalry. Although most of the flowers had been trampled in the chaos, Kishiar didn’t show displeasure at the commoners’ thrown flowers; instead, he picked up a single bloom with a smile.

Even holding a wilted flower, his elegance and dignity remained unscathed. This sight momentarily took the breath away from onlookers, who then waved their hands in awe.

‘What is this feeling?’

Lusan, who had been working tirelessly to maintain the sacred flame, felt a tug at his heartstrings for the first time as he watched Kishiar. The square, which was filled with screams and fear just moments before, now resounded with different kinds of cheers, creating an unfamiliar, almost mystical spectacle.

“Do you see? It’s thanks to your timely bravery that none of these people were harmed.”

In the midst of the cheering, Kishiar addressed Revlin Shand Apeto.

“As the head of the Cavalry, I must personally express my gratitude.”

“No, I haven’t done anything myself. It was the Cavalry under your lead, Your Grace, that resolved the issue. I believe the praise should rightfully be directed towards them.”

Even amidst the Duke’s praise and the cheering, Revlin remained humble. His stern expression, void of a boyish smile given his age, drew even more applause from the crowd.

“One should always return a favor received.”

Looking back at the modest and heroic boy, Kishiar extended a hand with a soft gaze.

“Revlin Shand Apeto. I will reward you for your courage and ability. If there is anything you desire, state it here. I promise, in the name of Duke Peletta, to grant it.”

“I didn’t do it with any such expectation.”

Revlin shook his head, but Kishiar did not back down.

“You’ve protected the Emperor’s subjects, which is also my wish. It would be a disgrace to do a good deed and not receive a reward. Do you intend to shame both the Emperor and me?”

“No, I don’t.”

After some hesitation, Revlin finally conceded. The crowd eagerly leaned in, curious as to what this remarkable boy would request as his reward.

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Chapter 130

“I do not desire gold or jewels. If there’s one thing I want…”

“Speak.”

As the sentence trailed off, Kishiar, who responded as if pushing him to continue, turned to Revlin, who was filled with tension.

“I’ve always admired and desired to be part of… the Cavalry.”

“The Cavalry?”

Upon hearing those words, Kishiar slightly raised an eyebrow, but the others did not. The unexpected request from Revlin caused the room to echo with hurried intakes of breath. Lusan was equally as incredulous.

‘The scion of the Dukedom wants to join the Cavalry?’

Among the powerful nobles of the capital, there had not been a single awakened individual so far. Yet the youngest of the Apeto family, one of the four great Dukedoms, not only revealed himself as an Awakener but also expressed his desire to join the Cavalry, created by Duke Peletta, a close confidant and kinsman of the Emperor. Considering the Cavalry’s stark contrast to the nobility’s image, it was a situation bound to surprise anyone.

“That’s… surprising. Are you serious?”

“Yes. That’s the only thing I desire.”

Revlin firmly stated he needed no other reward. Even those disinterested in the ways of the world knew of the ongoing conflict

between the Emperor and the four great Dukedoms that had persisted for generations.

Young Revlin Shand Apeto might have been ignorant of such political issues, but Kishiar certainly was not. Thus, everyone thought that his request would surely be denied.

“…Very well.”

However, Kishiar La Orr once again easily overturned such assumptions.

“Promises should be kept.”

“Are you serious?”

“Honestly, your abilities are quite tempting. However, given that we have members who went through trials to join us, it might be difficult to accept you mid-way. How about we put you on the list as a temporary member until the next recruitment period for the Cavalry?”

Without hesitation, Revlin answered loudly.

“Of course, that would be excellent!”

“Then it’s settled.”

Watching the conversation conclude so smoothly, Lusan found his mouth agape.

‘Is it really okay to accept him so easily?’

“From this moment, I, Kishiar La Orr, announce that Revlin Shand Apeto is accepted as a temporary member of the Cavalry.”

“Wow, Wowwww!”

The people, who had been making similar expressions as Lusan, let out cheers as they belatedly heard Kishiar's proclamation. Despite the slightly awkward atmosphere compared to before, most believed that Kishiar had made a remarkable decision.

"What in the world is happening here!"

Yet the time of surprise and cheering was short-lived. With a shout from the elder priest Beltrail, who belatedly emerged from the depths of the temple, the square became as quiet as if doused with cold water.

Beltrail, with his face severely frowned, appeared and went straight to his nephew Revlin without even greeting Duke Peletta. He raised his voice.

"What is the meaning of this, third prince of the Apeto family? Awakened and joining the Cavalry? Surely I must have misheard?"

"Uncle. I…"

"Oh, Elder Priest Beltrail Shand Apeto. Long time no see."

Before a visibly stiffened Revlin could respond, Kishiar intervened with a greeting.

"I was indeed curious as to what urgent matter could have prompted the person responsible for this incident to leave their post, but I am glad to see you in good health."

Normally, it was highly impolite to intrude on someone else's conversation, but no one here could afford to ignore the Duke of Peletta, the speaker. Beltrail, who had tried to pretend not to notice him, reluctantly twisted his lips and bowed his head.

"…Yes. I did not expect Your Highness to come here in person. I am truly glad to see you well."

“Indeed. I also never dreamed I’d be here. Just moments ago, I was talking with the emissaries on the Hill of Abundance, and suddenly, there was chaos as if a great event had happened here. When I ran over there, it seemed your remarkable nephew had fortunately resolved the situation without any casualties.”

Kishiar pointed slightly towards the hill visible from the square and smiled.

“It was fortunate indeed. I don’t want to imagine what would have happened here without the ability Revlin possess. How happy I am that you have a nephew who is both talented and humble.”

“Your Grace. It seems there is some misunderstanding.”

Beltrail forced a smile, glaring at Revlin who stood next to Kishiar.

“When the incident occurred, I knew I could not solve it alone and immediately went to the temple for help. I am very pleased that the situation was resolved quickly in the meantime. However, I cannot comprehend what you said about the third prince.”

“What is it you do not understand?”

“To my knowledge, the third prince is not an Awakener.”

At Beltrail’s firm response, Kishiar’s smile deepened.

“What are you talking about? He himself admitted he was an Awakener. Many people here saw him use his power.”

“Someone else must have used their ability and he lied, saying it was his own. The third prince, since his childhood, due to his poor health, has occasionally been unable to distinguish between reality and fantasy.”

“Do you think that makes sense?”

Kishiar chuckled softly, looking at Beltrail forcing the issue. However, no one who understood the hidden meaning could laugh.

Beltrail was using one of the political rhetorics often employed by nobles. Even if it's a fact everyone knows, if a powerful noble insists 'it's not a fact', it can officially be made non-existent. In other words, Beltrail intended to openly suppress the fact that Revlin was an Awakener in front of Kishiar.

At this statement, revealing how lightly the members of the Duke's family, including Beltrail, took the Duke of Peletta, several people hardened their expressions. The Duke of Peletta, although his image has slightly changed since creating the Cavalry, was still infamous for being a 'defective' item.

Revlin stepped into the tension of this critical moment. The boy, who stood between his uncle and Kishiar, opened his mouth with a hardened expression and raised his voice so everyone could hear.

"Uncle. I am an Awakener. And now, I am a member of the Cavalry. Duke of Peletta, no, Commander. You personally permitted this, why do you deny it now? Isn't it a good thing if I can save people with the power I possess?"

"Third prince."

Beltrail called for Revlin with an icy face.

"Enough with the unwise remarks. Think of Duke Apeto and the Second Prince."

"But Uncle, when I became Awakene…"

"Given the state of your health, your solo appearance at the event seems to have had a negative impact. It would be better for you to return home."

With a swift cut off of Revlin's words, Beltrail gestured, and the sturdy knights behind him grabbed the boy's shoulders.

"Uncle!"

"Escort the Third Prince to Apeto Manor. Quickly."

Revlin struggled to break free from the knights' grip. But then, a soft voice halted him.

"Revlin. You must be exhausted from dealing with the accident. For now, go back."

"Commander…"

Kishiar lightly tapped the boy's shoulder with a smile.

"Regardless of what happened, the fact that you've already become a member of my Cavalry hasn't changed. Didn't all these people see? I'll contact you later, so go back and rest easy."

Though he seemed to be talking to Revlin, Kishiar's red eyes remained fixated on Beltrail, the Elder Priest, without a hint of movement. Unaware of this, Revlin vanished, led by the knights, after murmuring a choked plea for future contact.

"…Did you really have to do this?"

"It's a shame that you, Elder Priest, seem to misunderstand me and my Cavalry."

After Revlin's disappearance, a bitter chill blew between Beltrail and Kishiar. All wore smiles, yet their eyes were as icy as frost.

"I will contact Duke Apeto about this matter promptly."

"I will also watch how you handle and take responsibility for the incident that occurred at today's event."

“…”

Only upon hearing these words did Beltrail, the Elder Priest, remember his duty to handle the aftermath of the incident at the Sharing of the Sacred Flame event. His expression subtly shifted.

‘Did he forget? Was he more preoccupied with proving his nephew isn’t the Awakened?’

Observing this, Lusan sniffed, feeling anew that ordinary people like him were not part of Beltrail’s considerations.

“My team member found and destroyed this inside the offering box. The sole piece of evidence.”

Kishiar casually held up a gold and silver horse statuette, the evidence he had been clutching, and handed it over to Beltrail.

“…I am grateful for your kindness.”

“I hope you will find out who the culprit is and what their motive was for sabotaging the event and disturbing the holy festival week. This incident was not just a small accident, but a bold provocation in front of foreign diplomats.”

“I hope you will solve it, for the honor of the Temple of the Sun God.” His tone was utterly gentle, but Beltrail’s smile began to fade as he listened.

“I understand. Now, if you will excuse me, I am not well and must take my leave.”

“Very well.”

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Chapter 131

The moment Kishiar granted permission, the Elder Priest of Beltrail departed, stirring a cool breeze. As the people who watched his retreat felt the tense atmosphere dissolve, they relaxed and exchanged subtly interested glances.

A public clash had occurred between Duke Peletta and the House of Duke Apeto. The sense that neither side would back down gave rise to a premonition of an imminent and tremendous tumult.

“Yuder. Let’s leave the others to the imperial army now, and head back.”

“Understood.”

Lusan observed the black-haired Cavalry member who had remained quietly by Kishiar’s side.

‘Right, I should thank him.’

She had been too flustered before to express her gratitude. She knew she might never see him again if she missed this chance, so now was the time to thank him.

“Excuse me, could you wait for a moment?”

Lusan rushed over, mustered his courage, and grabbed the sleeve of his benefactor’s cloak.

“…”

The black-haired man turned his head with an expressionless face. Lusan flinched involuntarily, but soon realized that the man’s look was more of curiosity than annoyance, and he relaxed.

‘Does he not remember me? It was such a chaotic situation, so it’s understandable.’

“I, uh, I wanted to thank you for your help earlier……”

As the man turned his emotionless face, Lusan noticed a thin wound on his neck and his words faltered.

“You’ve… got… a wound on your neck. It seems like you should get it treated…”

“I’m fine…”

“Let me do it.”

Before he even finished speaking, a radiant light enveloped the man’s body. There was no need to pour so much divine power just to treat a small wound, but Lusan deliberately used more force than usual. His intention was to express his gratitude by using his greatest strength, his divine power, to its fullest.

A moment later, the light receded, revealing the man with slightly widened eyes. The wound on his neck had long since vanished without a trace.

“You’re young but you possess incredible divine power.”

Kishiar, who had been watching a few steps away, commented with an intrigued tone. Not expecting the noble Duke to speak to him, Lusan responded cautiously, feeling a tightening in his chest.

“Ah, yes. As a sign of gratitude… I poured more to aid your recovery.”

“With that kind of skill, you must be from the Healer’s guild. What’s your name? How long have you been a Priest?”

“No, not from the Healer’s guild. I’m still a novice Priest, not yet a full Priest. My name is Lusan, and it’s been about four years since I started walking the path of a Priest.”

The Healer’s guild was one of the internal groups of the Grand Temple. It was famous for being composed of priests renowned throughout the continent for their exceptional divine power. But Lusan, who hadn’t even advanced to the level of a full priest, was in a position where he had to worry about whether he could even become an ordinary priest, let alone join the Healer’s guild.

“A novice priest?”

Kishiar furrowed his brow, candidly showing surprise in his eyes.

“Unbelievable. With such impressive skill.”

“Thank you. But just because my divine power is strong, doesn’t mean I can become a full priest straight away…… haha.”

In truth, Lusan hailed from a humble temple in the northeastern countryside, having been recommended to the Grand Temple due to his remarkable divine power by an elderly priest who recognized his abilities. Upon reaching the Grand Temple, it was suggested that he would quickly move through a few months of priesthood training before being placed in the Healer’s guild, given the level of his divine power.

However, the problem lay with his character. Lusan did not obediently follow his superiors like the other novice priests. If he deemed something wrong, he would refuse to do it even at the risk of his own life, and this attitude quickly drew the ire of those above him. In the end, he fell from grace in the Grand Temple where political maneuvering was often more important than divine power.

“…I see.”

Even without hearing the full story, a twisted smile momentarily danced on the lips of Kishiar, suggesting he had inferred the circumstances.

“There are too many blind leaders in this world who insist on ignoring what is clearly in front of them. However, does that make the existing issues disappear? Was it Lusan, you said? You’ll soon be ready for your priest ordination, so keep your spirits up.”

“Thank you.”

Lusan was touched and almost grinned foolishly as the noble descendant of the Sun God’s bloodline not only called his name but also gave him lavish praise.

“Thank you for the healing.”

The Cavalry member with black hair who had been standing quietly expressed his thanks formally. Lusan nodded with a small smile.

“Don’t mention it. As a novice Priest, I rarely use my divine power, so please seek my assistance anytime if needed.”

However, in reality, Lusan assumed that he would likely never meet them again. He had always said the same thing to many people he had healed by chance, but no one had ever sought out an insignificant novice Priest like him again.

‘Life can indeed bring about such events. It’s a relief that I’m creating a good memory before getting kicked out of the Grand Temple.’

Days later, he was suddenly and inexplicably ordained as a regular Priest. If he had known that a request for a permanent priest would arrive from the Cavalry as if they had been waiting for this moment, he would not have agreed.

—

With the disturbance at the Sharing of the Sacred Flame ceremony, another storm of controversy swept across the capital. However, the focus was not on who the culprit was or what efforts were being made to solve the problem. Whenever people gathered, they enjoyed gossiping about the uproar between the two ducal houses.

“Do you think that young lord can really become a Cavalry? I heard that the House of Apeto is completely upset.”

“Duke Apeto was so angry upon hearing the news that he beat his servant to death.”

“Duke Peletta announced he would visit the House of Apeto to meet the third son. Would they even open their doors for him?”

“There’s no way they’d open their doors if the third son might be taken from the house. They’ll definitely reject him at the gate!”

While there were many rumors, all the reactions were not much different from what Kishiar had anticipated.

Duke Apeto officially denied that Revlin was an Awakener and claimed that an ordinary person like him couldn’t join the Cavalry. Kishiar, however, using his authority as the head of the Cavalry, publicly transmitted a request for a meeting. Rumors that Revlin was being confined and abused were already rife in the capital. Kishiar also added that he needed to confirm Revlin’s safety with his own eyes.

The numerous foreign envoys present in the capital, along with the citizens, took great interest in this matter. The unfolding drama in the Orr Empire, known as the continent’s loser and boasting the oldest history and culture, brought them a hidden pleasure. For a long time, they had been watching the situation with curiosity,

wondering whether a power shift would finally occur within the ever-unchanging empire.

As the conflict between the two dukes who refused to yield even an inch became more intense, the Emperor finally intervened. Emperor Keilusa, who had not once made an appearance outside of the imperial palace despite the festivities, conveyed his opinion to the two dukes via a letter.

In summary, it was an order to stop disturbing the capital for unnecessary reasons during a time when all eyes were on them due to the festival, and to resolve the issue according to the law.

Upon receiving the letter, the two dukes had dramatically different reactions.

By law, it had to be determined whether Revlin was truly an Awakener before deciding whether it was appropriate to accept him into the Cavalry. The Apeto family had consistently claimed that the third prince was definitely not an Awakener, but they had not tried to provide any evidence to support this. It was because they knew they would be at a distinct disadvantage if the matter were to be verified.

Many nobles, including Duke Apeto, protested vehemently, arguing that the Emperor was blatantly favoring his younger brother, Duke Peletta. However, public opinion sided with the Emperor. His words to resolve the issue according to the law sounded much more just than the Apeto family's attempts to sweep the matter under the rug, so this result was only natural.

After protesting and getting nowhere, the Apeto family, unable to withstand the unfavorable public opinion, took a step back. They eventually allowed Kishiar to visit the Apeto family's main estate to meet Revlin.

"Revlin, I just can't understand why you're doing this. Even now, you can say that you're not an Awakener, and that all of this was

simply a misunderstanding on Duke Peletta's part. It's a simple matter," said Second Prince Lenore, as he faced Revlin, who was confined to his room. Since Revlin's return from the Sharing of the Sacred Flame ceremony, the brothers had repeated this conversation numerous times. However, the conclusion was always the same; Lenore, in his anger, would leave the conversation unfinished.

But today, things could not end that way. After all, the disgraceful event of their father, Duke Apeto, accepting Duke Peletta's demands had occurred.

Lenore recalled the brief conversation he had had with his father just before coming here.

"I just can't understand what's gotten into that boy. They say an enemy within is more dangerous than one outside, but I never dreamed I would see my own son siding with the enemy in my lifetime! Are you telling me, Lenore, that as his elder brother, you had absolutely no inkling about what was happening?"

Duke Apeto, imagining the Cavalry and Kishiar stepping into the prestigious Apeto family's main residence, trembled in rage. With Revlin confined to his room, all his anger was directed toward his second son, Lenore.

"I apologize. I also had no idea that Revlin was taking the fact that he was an Awakener so seriously. If I had known, I would never have allowed him to meet the Cavalry…"

"I don't want to hear it! And yet, you're saying you want the position of the heir?"

Facing Duke Apeto's annoyed gaze, Lenore clenched his fists in humiliation and gritted his teeth.

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Chapter 132

Absurd. I have no need for a merely healthy child! Despite his slight weakness, Aishes has never acted like you. It’s natural, given the difference in bloodline!

Father.

Lenore called to the Duke with a face gone pale. The mother of the current heir and the first-born son, Aishes Shand Apeto, was of noble lineage, originating from the Tain Dukedom, one of the four ducal families standing shoulder to shoulder with Apeto.

However, Lenore and Revlin were born to the woman whom Duke Apeto had remarried after her death, a daughter of a count’s family. That family wasn’t weak, but they didn’t match up to a ducal one. Duke Apeto would often remind Lenore of this fact, stoking his feelings of inferiority.

Go convince your brother. If you can’t, be prepared to give up all the things you’ve been doing!

After being driven out by the Duke, Lenore immediately went to see Revlin. He desired nothing more than to kill the brother before his eyes on the spot, but the thought that he would surely forfeit any chance of being the successor if he did so held him back.

He strained to maintain an air of calm and affection as he tried to convince Revlin.

“You surely don’t want those guys to trample the lands of Apeto with their dirty boots, do you? Eh? Why do you like a group of jesters from Duke Peletta’s Cavalry so much? Do you really think Duke Peletta likes you?”

“…”

“No. He is simply using you to mock Apeto. Please, come to your senses. I will give you anything you want. Ok?”

Lenore rattled off the names of things that he thought his brother might desire. However, neither the sword, nor the jewels, nor the famous horse could open his brother’s mouth.

Lenore, who already had a short fuse, eventually reached his limit.

“Damn it. Do you know what I had to hear from father because of you? If I can’t become the heir because of the foolish thing you’ve done, do you think you will be safe, Revlin!”

The vase he threw shattered against the wall. He proceeded to smash the objects around Revlin before falling into a chair, panting for breath. Surprisingly, Revlin was still calmly looking at him, showing no signs of fear. The boy finally opened his lips slowly with a cold look in his eyes.

“You finally seem like the brother I know.”

“What?”

“It was strange when you suddenly started being nice. You’re not the type to hold back your anger, so I feel relieved now.”

Lenore was momentarily at a loss for words.

“You…”

“Do you know what? Among all the things you mentioned, there wasn’t a single thing I wanted. Not from father, not from the uncle, everyone’s the same. They either get angry or treat me like a fool, keeping me locked up, and no one listens to me.”

“So, you mean that man is different? Duke Peletta is different?”

“Yes. He is.”

Revlin responded nonchalantly.

“He listened to what I wanted right from the start.”

“Ha. Really? What is this thing you want, exactly? Let me hear it too!”

“I’ve already told you. Many times.”

“Told me? When did you?”

Lenore thought his younger brother was lying. However, when he caught sight of his brother’s icy glare filled with hatred, he was suddenly at a loss for words.

“I’ve told you countless times. I’ve pleaded desperately, over and over! If anyone can’t remember, it’s you, not me! Stop bothering me and go strive to secure the heirship you so desire!”

Lenore was rendered speechless in the face of that rage and mocking gaze.

‘When did Revlin start wearing such an expression?’

In Lenore’s memories, Revlin was always a frail boy who seemed perpetually on the verge of death. While Lenore was largely indifferent towards his pitiful younger sibling, he would occasionally show him some sympathy, due to their shared brotherhood. However, the boy before him was different. The Revlin of the present didn’t appear weak at all. He had grown enough to hold his stand against Lenore.

Having realized this, a deeply shocked Lenore exited Revlin’s room, only to be approached urgently by a servant who reported that

their uncle Beltrail, an Elder Priest, was looking for him.

“The Elder Priest is seeking me? Why are you only telling me this now? You fool!”

Letting out his anger that he had garnered because of Revlin on the innocent servant with a slap to the face, Lenore headed towards the annex. The basement of the annex was no different from the last time he was there, but the expression on Beltrail who awaited him there was starkly different.

“Your Grace, as long as your father still bows down, it seems that the arrival of Duke Peletta is a done deal. Therefore, should we not make preparations, Second Prince?”

“What preparations are you talking about?”

“You surely don’t plan to leave the people here as they are.”

Only when Beltrail surveyed the surroundings did Lenore realize what he was implying.

‘I wondered what he was talking about.’

Lenore had assumed that Beltrail would suggest a solution to his current predicament. However, all his uncle wanted was to ensure his research wasn’t damaged.

‘How can he only care about his own interests in this situation?’

On reflection, the direct cause of this whole mess was Beltrail himself. If Beltrail had not vacated his seat and kept a close eye on Revlin during the Sharing of the Sacred Flame Ceremony, none of this would have happened. Yet, Beltrail evaded responsibility under the pretext of being a priest, leaving Lenore to bear the brunt of Duke Apeto’s fury.

And now he had the audacity to summon the busy Lenore without a word of apology, asking him to hide his research subjects from the eyes of Duke Peletta.

‘Initially, the only reason I helped my uncle was because I thought it might help me secure the position of heir. I’m in such trouble, but instead of repaying the assistance he’s received, he’s only thinking about his research.’

It was unfair. It was exceedingly unfair.

‘If I fall, it won’t just be the end for me. This useless research he’s been funding thanks to me will also go up in smoke!’

“Second Prince?”

“Yes, Uncle.”

Lenore answered Beltrail’s call, maintaining an expression no different than usual.

“So… you wish to move these people before Duke Peletta arrives?”

“That’s correct. Rumor has it there are individuals within the Cavalry who can sensitively detect the presence of Awakeners. If Duke Peletta brings such a person and they discover this place, what will become of us?”

That rumor had been a deliberate leak by Kishiar, but they hadn’t considered that far.

“What does it matter. If things get tough, they’ll just push it onto me again.”

Once suspicion set in, Lenore couldn’t stand to see even the benevolent smile on Beltrail’s face. He turned his gaze away from his

uncle’s face and opened his mouth in a heavy tone.

“Understood. The Duke of Peletta is coming tomorrow, so let’s have the servants move them out before then.”

“They must not be allowed to escape. They could run away.”

“So, what are you suggesting?”

Beltrail was taken aback by the unusually sharp retort. Utilizing his sense, honed by internal power struggles in the temple, he quickly grasped that his young nephew was growing irritated with him.

“Second Prince. I ask this of you for your own good. Don’t you understand?”

“I wonder. I’m not sure if you really intend to help me. If you wanted to help, you would have produced a decent result during the year or so that’s passed.”

“I understand your frustration. But us falling apart due to internal mistrust is exactly what the Duke of Peletta wants. You must protect the Third Prince from falling into their hands and keep this place safe.”

Beltrail didn’t particularly like the cruel and selfish Second Prince Lenore, but he knew all too well that his research could only continue if Lenore was there. Reluctantly, he had to placate and persuade him.

“And besides, our research is at a critically important juncture. Three of the test subjects here entered their mating period yesterday. I’ve discovered that an Awakener in heat exerts an involuntary influence on Awakeners who haven’t manifested their second genderCough, Cough!”

Beltrail, who had been speaking faster than usual, suddenly broke into a fit of coughing. When he removed his hand from his mouth, his white priestly robe was stained with blood in several places.

“Phew.”

Seeing this, Lenore frowned and let out a sigh. It wasn’t surprising to see him coughing up blood; it was a sight all too common in the Apeto household.

The ‘Blood of Blessing’ of the Apeto family affected Beltrail, who had become a priest, long before leaving his family, without exception. He, too, had been terribly frail since childhood, much like Aishes or Revlin.

“In any case, trust me, this time we will make progress.”

In truth, Lenore knew that Beltrail was so dedicated to his research because of his frailty. His trust in his uncle wasn’t unfounded.

“I’ll send the servants tomorrow morning. When they arrive, please take the test subjects and follow the food supply tunnel to the western forest. Even if the Duke of Peletta comes with his entire Cavalry, they won’t be able to find you there.”

At Lenore’s words, Beltrail nodded without hesitation.

“I understand.”

“Please keep your promise to make progress. This might be the last time.”

With those words, Lenore left the annex without looking back.

The beautiful main house of the Apeto Duchy was enveloped in an eerie silence and remained uneasy throughout the aftermath. Even the servants moving between the buildings couldn’t manage their usual cheerful expressions.

And finally, a day passed.

The Duke of Peletta, riding a horse with a crest that combined symbols of the sun, tree, and fire, finally appeared before the Apeto family.

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Chapter 133

“I can’t believe such a grand mansion exists in the world… The capital is truly impressive.”

“The Imperial Palace is even larger, Sister Ever. There, an entire wall is the palace.”

“Really? It’s hard to even imagine.”

Yuder silently watched Ever and Kanna, who seemed to be enjoying themselves. Today was an important day when Kishiar finally set foot in the Apeto mansion.

Normally, befitting a Duke’s procession, many would follow behind him, but Kishiar brought only seven Cavalry members, including Yuder, Kanna, Ever, Jimmy, Gakane, and the Eldore siblings, and his adjutant, Nathan Zuckerman. It was an exceedingly small number for an official visit by a Duke.

The reason for such a small number was simple. The Apeto family had notified Kishiar of a limit on the number of people he could bring. Although it was a petty scheme intended to humiliate him, Kishiar had enjoyed the restriction, personally selecting those he would bring.

‘If they’re going to impose such a limitation, then we should bring those who appear to be the least threatening. In fact, it will be easier for us to do what we must do there if we appear harmless.’

Thus, the selected Cavalry members, unsure of the criteria by which they were chosen, were inside the Apeto mansion, enjoying the beautiful view of the garden from the reception room. The magnificent garden, as if actual nature had been transplanted, was more dazzling than even the Imperial Palace’s garden. It was a sight

that could easily tire one’s eyes and a testament to the power of the Dukedom.

“You all are enjoying the refreshments. Feel free to ask for more once you finish, don’t hesitate to eat as much as you’d like.”

“Can we really?”

Kishiar, who was elegantly sitting in the center of the reception room, watching the members chattering, kindly opened his mouth after noticing the snack plate quickly emptied. Seeing Jimmy, who couldn’t put down his fork out of regret, Nathan, who had been standing behind Kishiar, motioned to the Apeto family’s servant, who was growing weary.

“Please bring more snacks.”

“Understood…”

As soon as Kishiar and his party arrived, the Apeto family had led them to the reception room and then left them alone for over an hour. Despite a situation that would usually provoke rage, the servants of the Apeto family were growing increasingly frustrated by the calm and carefree Cavalry members, who were eating snacks, admiring the garden, and chatting.

‘Even without guidance on how to handle such a situation, they’re all managing well on their own.’

Yuder watched fondly as the Eldore siblings played, carelessly breaking various items, Jimmy ate snacks earnestly, and Gakane joined Kanna and Ever, enjoying a lively chat. He couldn’t help but wonder how infuriated the Duke of Apeto, who had left them alone, must be by now. Kishiar, too, had a full smile on his face, likely harboring a similar thought.

“The tea tastes especially good today.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

“Did everyone check whether the map drawn by Revlin aligns with the actual location of the buildings?”

Hiding his lips slightly behind a tea cup, Kishiar asked in a relaxed tone. Yuder nodded, glancing briefly at the huge window where Kanna, Ever, and Gakane were standing.

“We checked as soon as we arrived. The window location provides a good view of the entire mansion.”

“Ah. It’s just like the esteemed Apeto Dukedom’s mansion. They certainly know how to treat guests.”

“I agree with you.”

At Yuder’s calm response, Kishiar laughed softly.

“Everyone has reviewed the plan I handed out yesterday, right?”

“Of course.”

“Your role is the most critical, but remember, there’s no need to overdo it.”

Kishiar had gathered the members the night before to explain their duties at the Apeto mansion. In order to deal with various issues as quickly as possible at the Apeto mansion, the seven members each had a distinct role. Yuder had been assigned the most crucial role, that of locating and aiding the escape of the captured Awakeners.

“Here, as you requested, I’ve brought more snacks.”

As Yuder was reviewing his tasks for the day, a servant cautiously approached the table, carrying a bowl piled high with pastries.

“Wow, these look delicious.”

Jimmy’s eyes lit up with anticipation. The boy, who had been growing rapidly since his second gender manifestation, was displaying an appetite that was several times more robust than before.

“Is the Duke of Apeto still not ready?”

Kishiar addressed the servant who was hastily attempting to retreat after setting down the pastry bowl. The servant, hoping Kishiar wouldn’t kill him out of anger, cautiously repeated the response he had been instructed to give.

“Yes, yes… His Grace is unfortunately feeling unwell, so his preparations are taking longer than anticipated.”

“I see. What about my dear temporary member, Prince Revlin?”

Kishiar’s casual mention of the third prince’s name, as though referring to a pet, sent a chill down the servant’s spine.

“Prince Revlin is also… taking a long time to prepare….”

“It’s been an hour.”

“Yes… He’s frail, so we can’t rush him….”

“Hmm.”

The moment Kishiar let out a sigh that sounded more like a groan, the servant squeezed his eyes shut. If he gave such a response to the Duke at the Apeto mansion, he wouldn’t have a word to say for himself if he ended up dead with his head smashed against a wall. Recently, many of the servants serving the Duke had been severely injured and replaced.

The servant thought that Kishiar wouldn't be any different, but all he heard was the rustle of clothing as Kishiar stood from his seat.

"Can't be helped then. I've waited as long as I could, I'll have to go and meet them myself."

"…Pardon?"

Kishiar spoke softly, but his voice contained an undeniable power.

"I'm a busy man. I've waited as long as I can. Now it's time to take action."

Caught off guard, the servant shook his head desperately.

"It's not possible. Duke Apeto is still not….!"

"I originally came to see my member, not the Duke of Apeto. Tell the others when they're ready to come to where I am. Step aside."

"Don't block the Duke's way."

At Nathan Zuckerman, Kishiar's adjutant's, light instruction, the path was cleared and Kishiar began to stride forward. His members, as if they had been waiting, uniformly followed him.

"Ah, what a shame. I wanted to eat more."

"I almost died waiting for you to move."

"Are we finally going to search for Prince Revlin now?"

Their comments lacked manners, but there was an unexpected weight to them, impossible to imagine from the people who had just been lazing around. Unconsciously, the servant backed away at their energy, breaking out into a cold sweat.

“Ah, this can’t be…”

By the time he managed to collect himself and evacuate the desolate reception room, the entourage of Duke Peletta had long since disappeared from sight. It was an urgent situation. The servant dashed off to report the situation.

“I will go find Revlin right away.”

Exiting the reception room, Kishiar walked briskly, only looking straight ahead as he spoke.

“Everyone remembers how to signal in an emergency situation?”

“Yes.”

“Remember, your safety and life are more important than the mission. Now, let’s split up and move.”

As soon as he finished speaking, Kishiar smoothly turned his body toward the appearing staircase. Nathan, Kanna, Jimmy, and the Eldore siblings followed his lead, changing direction. Yuder did not watch them disappear, but continued walking down the hallway before turning in a completely different direction. He felt the presence of Ever and Gakane following him.

Using the information Revlin had written in his letters, they cunningly avoided people’s eyes and descended. Before they exited the main building entrance, they nearly encountered a servant, but they hid in the next room, pretending to be newly arrived workers, and made loud conversation. The servant walked past their room without suspicion and disappeared.

Revlin had informed them that due to the Duke’s ill-tempered nature and Lenore, the servants of Apeto House changed quite frequently. Thus, the servants of the Apeto House did not pay much

attention when they heard unfamiliar voices or sensed unfamiliar presences.

Yuder, who safely left the main building, quickly checked the shortcut mark to the annex and started to move, speaking to the two behind him.

“Once we reach the annex, we’ll first check if there’s anyone inside. Action comes after.”

According to the plan, Ever was to go up to the third floor of the annex to rescue Dandenion, and Gakane was to go downstairs to find traces and evidence of the Awakeners.

“We understand. As soon as we rescue him, we go straight to the agreed-upon place to join up. Right?”

Ever pulled at the tips of her combat gloves as she asked lightly. The sky-blue gloves made from special monster skin were a piece of protective gear specially made for her ahead of this festival.

“That’s right. If Dandenion doesn’t listen…”

“You said to make him faint quickly before our eyes meet. I’m confident.”

Ever shook her finger lightly with a smile. No one could have guessed her power from her seemingly innocuous appearance.

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The ability of Dandenion, as told by Revlin, was to stiffen the body of anyone whose gaze he met. Since he could not stiffen everyone all at once, it would be challenging to win against Ever.

Regardless of Dandenion's poor condition, having been imprisoned and drugged for a long time, he could be reasoned with, or perhaps even overwhelmed, if Ever were involved. This was the very reason why Kishiar had designated her for this role.

"What will we do, Yuder, if there are more pieces of evidence left underground than we expect? Upon reflection, I find myself unable to discern what matters most," Gakane asked, as if he had been waiting for the chance to do so.

Yuder, without hesitation, responded promptly, "Prioritize papers, books, or any belongings that Kanna would find useful to read. If you can't take everything, use your shadow clone to hide the rest appropriately."

"Papers, right. Okay, got it."

Gakane reached into his uniform coat and pulled out a leather pouch that he had hidden, folded several times. On the surface, it looked like a regular pouch, but in reality, it was enchanted to lighten the weight of anything it contained.

Soon, they saw a detached house with a white roof. The three exchanged silent glances before heading towards the back entrance, typically used by the servants. This entrance, which led straight to the detached houses kitchen, was the easiest point of entry, a fact taught to them by none other than Revlin.

‘A servant I had bribed should have left this door open today,’ Yuder thought.

Without any hesitation, Yuder approached the small door and pulled the ring handle. The door opened smoothly, without resistance.

‘Even though the kitchen still has all the food intact, there is no sign of anyone… Kishiar’s predictions must have been right,’ Yuder surmised.

He looked around the kitchen, noticing the piles of dishes that had likely been washed just hours before, and neatly arranged fruits and grains. The only explanation for the absence of any servants, despite these clear signs of recent activity, was that everyone had been deliberately sent away, excluding those needed to move the experimental Awakeners trapped underground.

‘Even though they did this fearing Kishiar might show up, they probably didn’t expect it would make our job easier as well,’ he mused.

Kishiar had predicted that even if Apetos household sent all the servants from the detached house away, Dandenion, confined on the third floor, would still be held captive. Dandenion was not an experimental subject but an official escort of Revlin, who was technically imprisoned to serve a punishment. There would be no reason to hide him, since they had nothing to fear even if his presence was discovered.

Could the humans of Apetos household have imagined they were so tightly within Kishiar’s grip? Yuder gestured for Ever and Gakane to proceed inside as he glanced at them.

“…”

Words of greeting were unnecessary among the trio. Once he confirmed that Ever and Gakane had entered through the open door and moved in opposite directions, Yuder closed the kitchen door. His destination wasnt further into the building, but the shed next to a well outside.

According to Revlin's map, that place was the entrance to the basement passage of the detached house. With no hesitation, Yuder stepped in, inspecting the ground. He soon found a door, not entirely closed, hidden amongst the food sacks stacked around him.

A faint scent of blood seemed to waft amidst the faint footprints scattered haphazardly around him. Yuder took a deep breath, then opened the door and descended downwards. The words of Kishiar, who had talked about this place last night, sprung up vividly in his mind.

'The ultimate destination is likely to be the forest at the far west of the mansion grounds. It's dense with trees, out of sight from anyone, and with a shrine and prayer house set up, it's deemed ideal for hiding people.'

The underground passage was big enough for a cart to pass through, and magic stones were embedded in the walls, preventing it from being too dark. As a place originally used to deliver groceries from outside to Apeto Mansion at dawn, it was indeed well maintained for its purpose.

Yuder walked, finalizing the tasks he had to do.

'First, as soon as the Awakeners, priests, and servants, including the Elder Priest of Beltrail, are found, they are to be immediately suppressed and rendered unconscious. Then, after taking the Awakeners who are held captive, return via this passage to complete the mission, and meet up with Ever and Gakane. After that, go outside and make contact with the waiting Peletta Knights. That's it.'

In order to lead the Awakeners, said to number around 20, quite a lot of people must have been mobilized from Apeto Mansion. To suppress all these people with a single message before they properly grasp the situation, a considerable power would need to back it up. Yuder looked down at his own hand, wrapped in black gloves, and clenched and unclenched his fist lightly.

‘The condition is… good. I can do this.’

However, not long after gathering his resolve, Yuder suddenly smelled a pungent odor. At first, he thought it was just his imagination, but it wasn’t. The source of that familiar and intense smell became clearer as he moved forward.

‘This is…’

Yuder stopped in his tracks in front of a corpse lying dead in the middle of the corridor. The nameless man lay dead with his mouth open, displaying an expression full of terror, tightly grasping the handle of a dagger buried in his chest.

A foreboding chill brushed his spine. Yuder instantly sprinted forward. More corpses appeared in his path. He ran past all the other bodies, but he couldn’t ignore the body of a man dressed in white priestly robes.

The man in the priestly robes was lying in a slightly different position than the other corpses. Yuder noted that the priest must have died due to his head being smashed against the corridor wall.

He cautiously reached out and pulled the corpse by the shoulder. The stiff body fell to the side. The blood-soaked face was no different from the other corpses he had seen. His eyes were wide open and his mouth was agape, an expression clearly reflecting intense fear.

All the bodies lay dead with expressions of sheer terror. The priest had died by smashing his own head, but all the others had

their chests pierced by a weapon, clutching the handle as they fell.

Could all this really be a coincidence?

Yuder left the body of the priest and turned to run again. His heart began to pound even harder than before, perhaps because of the growing sense of dread. Soon, the exit leading to the western forest appeared. A noisy sound came from the wide-open exit. Slowing his pace and killing his presence, Yuder hid against the wall and peered out at the landscape beyond.

“Who on earth are you? An underling of Duke Peletta?”

The first sight that met his eyes was the back of a man, donned in a large hat and cloak, and countless bodies laid out before him. Yuder’s eyes widened when he noticed among the fallen, the one struggling to stay upright and howling in pain was none other than Elder Priest Beltrail Shand Apeto.

“How dare you do such a thing… If I knew, if I knew you were an Awakener, I would have… I…cough…!”

Beltrail, his forehead split and half of his face soaked in blood, raised his bloodshot eyes to howl in despair. Then he suddenly coughed, spewing blood. He kept coughing up blood until his face turned deep red and then finally fell forward, gasping for air. The cloaked man who had been quietly watching him finally chuckled and flipped his hat backward to remove it.

“For someone who claimed to know more about the Awakeners than anyone else, you seem quite surprised. That’s not entertaining at all, Priest.”

””

A chill ran down his spine the moment he heard that cold voice. Yuder instinctively clenched his fist, then slowly relaxed it. He had a

hunch, seeing the corpses on his way here, but confronting the reality was a different matter.

It was Nahan, the Awakener with illusion ability who had left a strong impression on Yuder in the East and had since disappeared. He stood in the Apeto estate, nonchalantly stepping over bodies, laughing.

—

Beltrail Shand Apeto, who had lived his entire life as a revered Elder Priest, was trembling in shock as he looked up at the horrifying face of the man standing over him, half distorted and half unscathed, laughing. He had researched the Awakeners since their first appearance in this world and had always thought he knew them better than anyone else. This current situation was beyond his belief.

‘He was just an ordinary servant a moment ago. He showed no signs of using his power, and the mercenary Awakeners didn’t say anything either. How did this… when did this man infiltrate my side and bewitch everyone…?’

Beltrail remembered the first time he had acknowledged the man, no, the servant he had been disguised as, a very long time ago. He had known there was such a servant moving between the guest house and the main hall. But back then, that servant had been no different from other ordinary ones. He had feared Beltrail and had never approached him without cause.

That servant had handed Beltrail a letter two days ago. It was not unusual for those wishing to send messages to the main hall through Beltrail to send letters to the Apeto estate, so he did not find this strange. But the contents of the letter were a little peculiar.

The author of the letter introduced himself as an emissary who had come for the festival from abroad. He had expressed his personal interest in the research on the Awakeners that Beltrail had

been publishing and politely requested to meet and have a conversation, if possible. To Beltrail, who was seeking a path to continue his research beyond Lenore and the Apeto family, this letter had arrived at a very opportune time.

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Beltrail conveyed his intention to the owner of the letter immediately, indicating that he wished to arrange a meeting. The response arrived the next morning, a day after, delivered by the servant who had handed over the letter.

I am deeply impressed by the wisdom of the Elder Priest, and I look forward to meeting you today to discuss matters in greater detail.

Today? Who sets a meeting on such short notice? He was initially puzzled and annoyed, but remembering that the other party was a foreign emissary, he quickly regained his composure.

Such an uncouth individual.

Though the content of the letter was intriguing, Beltrail was not leisurely enough to accept such a sudden visit.

After all, if the visitor came to the Apeto family residence and Beltrail chose not to meet him, that would be the end of it.

What will you do, Elder Priest? The servant who brought the letter is waiting outside the mansion. Should we send an immediate reply?

Never mind. I don’t have time to bother with that right now. Werent you once one of the servants in the outbuilding? Go down and help with the work.

In order to move all the test subjects who had been isolated in the basement of the outbuilding before the arrival of the Duke of Peletta leading the Cavalry to the Apeto residence, they needed to

act swiftly. Beltrail promptly withdrew his interest from irrelevant matters.

However, as he walked through the underground passage with the mercenary Awakeners and the servants leading the test subjects, a strange incident occurred suddenly.

Ahhhh!

In the passage, where the only light came from the magic stone, a shrill scream reverberated as one of the servants fell.

Save me. I I did wrong! I won’t touch those guys ever again! Please, no!

He stared into thin air like a madman, writhing on the floor and screaming. Because of him, the quiet passage instantly descended into chaos.

What in the world is happening? Can you not quiet down immediately?

First, Beltrail silenced the terrified screaming servants and went over to where the collapsed servant lay.

You there. What are you doing? Can’t you pull yourself together?

Beltrail instructed one of the assistant priests to imbue the fallen servant with divine power. Once done, the servant looked around as though he had regained some semblance of sanity. Seeing the terrified people and then Beltrails cold face, he broke into a fit of tears and gasps.

I did wrong. It’s all my fault. Elder Priest, please save me, save me!

Save you? What did you do wrong?

I, I disobeyed your orders, and and I laid hands on those Awakener bastards… ugh!

The servant couldn’t finish his sentence and fell again. This time, no one was able to use divine power on him.

Like a puppet being controlled by a massive hand, the servant contorted his body weirdly. He drew a dagger from his waist, trembling violently, and in a flash, stabbed himself in the chest. The dying servants eyes were wide open, as if he had seen something truly horrifying.

What a pity. He died too quickly. This is why one should not talk carelessly.

A voice that was somehow familiar yet strange cut through the shocked crowd. Recognizing the voice as belonging to the servant who had brought him the letter, Beltrail barely managed to respond.

What are you babbling about? If you’re a servant, act like one and…

“Darn it. Shaking in fear and speaking won’t lend any dignity, Elder Priest.”

A servant, no, a strange man, smirked at Beltrail, looking like a devil in the dim darkness. Only then did Beltrail realize that this man’s face was not familiar, it was completely strange, and he felt shocked.

Dark navy hair, a left face twisted red as if it had been burned, and a right face that was, in contrast, cold and handsome. The moment he saw the man’s left eye, unfocused and pale, he felt a sting in his stomach, and his legs went weak.

The man had surely been among Beltrail’s group from the beginning. But when did he start to look like this? Even after

reflecting on his memories, he couldn’t find an answer. Beltrail only then realized that he couldn’t be certain even of the servant’s demeanor that he thought he remembered. The servant’s name, his face, all were blurred as if someone had wiped away his memory.

“You, who… who on earth…”

“What does it matter who I am?”

The man with the horrific scar smiled grimly, raising just one corner of his mouth.

“We’re all going to die here, anyway.”

“Cocky bastard. What are you doing, kill him now!”

Beltrail did not want to admit that he felt fear under the man’s oppressive aura. He hastily ordered the mercenary Awakeners to attack the man, but they disappeared without a trace before they could even approach the man. The shocked servants screamed and pointed their fingers.

“How can he kill so many people without leaving a trace!”

“Perhaps those people never existed here in the first place.”

“Is this magic? Or are you an Awakener? Where the hell did you come from!”

Instead of answering, the man pointed towards the exit.

“Have you ever played a game of tag?”

When everyone was too horrified to speak, the man gently continued his words.

“No? Then you’ll learn now. You’d better run, or who knows what might happen to you.”

It’s going to be very fun.

Beltrail wanted to smack the man’s taunting face, but he couldn’t because the assistant priests started running, supporting his arm.

“Elder Priest, that man is not in his right mind. He doesn’t seem normal, so please get out as soon as possible and ask for help from the headquarters! That’s the priority.”

They were right. He couldn’t ask for help from headquarters while underground, so he had to get outside first. For the first time in his life, Beltrail had the strange experience of running with all his might. He felt the discomfort of his beautiful priest’s robe for the first time. While he was running clumsily, clutching the heavy, clingy hem of his robe, he kept hearing the sound of horrified screams from behind him.

In the end, Beltrail finally emerged from the exit. But he was not given the time to be glad that he had reached the western forest, his original destination. Unbelievably, the man with the scar had arrived first and was waiting for them.

“Haha. You look like you’ve seen a ghost. So, did you enjoy the game of tag?”

“How the hell did you get here first…?”

“The way you abandoned even your cherished test subjects, fleeing as you did, was indeed impressive, Elder Priest. I doubt I’ll see a sight more amusing in my lifetime.”

His smiling face was indeed the embodiment of a devil.

“No!”

Beltrail, gripped by extreme fear, floundered. He desperately cried out for others to strike down the demon and protect him. But as

if by magic, all the mercenary Awakeners around him vanished, and the priests fell vomiting blood, even though the man hadn't touched them.

Beltrail collapsed, feeling as if he were living a terrible nightmare, vomiting blood from intense emotions.

The perpetrator had to be a Cavalry member, sent by Duke Peletta Kishiar La Orr. Without doubt, they had dispatched the Cavalry to seize the test subjects and kill him, the obstacle. Beltrail's despair-ridden mind didn't question the man's identity.

"Yes, the letter you brought was all a lie from the start, wasn't it? You lulled me into complacency to seize the test subjects…! What did you do to my test subjects? Did you steal them from the underground tunnel? Or did you kill them?"

"Why so curious about what happened to those lives you discarded, Elder Priest?"

The man asked, seemingly genuinely puzzled. Overwhelmed by a sense of profound humiliation and anger, Beltrail coughed up a mouthful of blood.

"Regardless of securing those test subjects, you won't be able to kill me. Don't you know who I am? I am one of the Elder Priests of the Grand Temple from the Apeto family. Even if this incident comes to light, I can easily secure other test subjects and continue my research!"

But Duke Peletta would regret turning him and Apeto into enemies so carelessly. The man, upon hearing Beltrail's blood-soaked curse, chuckled softly and cocked his head, opening his mouth.

"Hahaha. That's all well and good, but there are a few things you've got wrong, and I think it's only fair I correct you."

“What nonsense are you spouting?”

“Firstly, I am not a subordinate of Duke Peletta. Nor am I part of the Cavalry.”

“…What?”

Beltrail, who had sworn not to believe a word the man said, was momentarily stunned into silence, forgetting even that resolve.

“What are you even talking about?”

“They might have realized by now that they’ve lost the advantage to me and might be rushing here. But that doesn’t really matter.”

“Then who the hell are you? To claim that you are not with Duke Peletta but managed to infiltrate Apeto’s stronghold alone, that’s nonsense!”

“That brings us to the second point I’d like to correct.”

Having said that, the man slowly moved closer to Beltrail. Beltrail instinctively retreated, shaking his head.

“Do… Don’t come any closer!”

“We can. As long as we have brothers and sisters who need us, we go wherever we must.”

“We…?”

As Beltrail stammered out his question, a light sparkled in the man’s eyes, a look of pure joy as if he had been waiting for just that question.

“The ‘Star of Nagran’.”

Beltrail didn’t recognize the unfamiliar phrase that slipped from the man’s lips.

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Chapter 136

“The ‘Star of Nagran’.”

Beltrail did not recognize the unfamiliar words that flowed from his mouth.

“What… star?”

Seeing that Beltrail did not understand the word he had spoken, the man smirked.

“It’s a pleasant term meaning paradise. The Star of Paradise. A place created solely for the salvation of our brethren. And we despise garbage like you the most.”

Did you think I wouldn’t know what you’ve been up to in the basement of the outbuilding? His cold, warmthless eyes seemed to suggest as much. At that moment, Beltrail instinctively realized that this man intended to kill him and trembled fiercely.

The reason he had saved Beltrail for last wasn’t merely because he was an Elder Priest or because of his high status. He simply wanted to inflict longer terror, greater pain, on his prey.

“No, I was, I was just, I was just conducting, conducting research….”

“Research…. that sickening study where you were trying to find a way to transform a human into an Awakener by replacing their entire blood with Awakener blood? Or are you talking about the damned experiment to see if an Awakener in heat could give birth to a child that isn’t cursed by your family’s accursed bloodline? There’s just too many for me to even know what you’re talking about.”

The once-respectful man mocked Beltrail with icy eyes.

“That’s not what you call research.”

“Ah, ahh!”

As soon as the man finished his words, the corpses around them began to rise and crawl towards them. Beltrail struggled to escape from the reaching hands of the clinging assistant priests’ corpses with empty eyes, but his legs felt rooted to the ground.

“No!”

Claw-like hands grabbed his limbs, and teeth soaked in blood tore into his flesh. Despite the gruesome sounds of flesh tearing and bones breaking, his mind was painfully clear, to the point of madness. Beltrail screamed in agonizing pain.

“Aaah! Save me! I admit, I’ve done wrong! Please, get these things off me!”

“Didn’t you ignore them when your test subjects said the same thing?”

The man’s slow words echoed clearly amidst the pain. Beltrail shook his head, crying out.

“It was all for the children of families suffering from the ‘Blood of Blessing’! Is it a sin to research for the sake of the children who were born to die immediately!”

“‘Blood of Blessing’, what a joke. It’s ‘Cursed Blood’, isn’t it? If it were truly a blessing, would trash like you be so desperate to resist it? Isn’t it all a result of you lot greedily desiring forbidden power?”

“Ah, ah!”

Incredibly, even though Beltrail had been half-eaten by the corpses, he hadn't died yet. Of course, the reason was that the eating corpses and the pain were all illusions, but Beltrail's mind, filled with extreme pain and fear, had already been paralyzed beyond the point of questioning this.

"Despite having coveted divine power, you're not satisfied. Now you're greedy for your brethren's power and lives as well. It's more righteous to dispose of trash like you for the greater good."

Beltrail couldn't hear the man's cold voice properly as he was screaming in pain from a corpse gnawing at his face. However, he could sense the killing intent becoming increasingly potent, so he desperately screamed his plea.

"No, please, I'll do anything. Please, save me!"

The man, void of any sign of hesitation, slowly opened his mouth to issue his final command to Beltrail.

"Now, it's time for you to die…"

At that moment, an unfamiliar force from somewhere rushed violently towards the man. He swiftly retreated, avoiding the power targeting him, but due to this, his attempt to kill Beltrail was left incomplete. His gaze turned towards the underground passage behind Beltrail.

"Well, they've arrived sooner than expected."

"Nahan."

Yuder, revealing himself from within the passageway, quietly called the man's name.

"Step back."

“What a pleasant face. Are you here to save the trash again, brother?”

“I told you clearly last time not to refer to me like that.”

Nahan grinned at Yuder’s cold retort, his sword drawn. His gaze briefly shifted towards the corridor where Yuder had been hiding, then swung back.

“Did you hear our conversation from inside there? Then you must know what trashy things this guy has done. And yet, you intend to interfere again?”

Yuder did not respond to his words. It wasn’t that he agreed with Nahan’s words, but his emotions were confused for other reasons.

‘I suspected that Nahan wasn’t acting personally, but I never thought I’d hear the name Star of Nagran here.’

In his previous life, he had heard about a group called Star of Nagran.

During the period when the Katchian Emperor was seriously reaching out to domestic and foreign powers to increase the forces that followed him, a terrorist group had made a plan to gather the Awakeners and attack the nobility and royalty of various countries. However, their plans collapsed due to internal division. That group’s name was the Star of Nagran.

While their base was destroyed due to infighting, fortunately, it was near the southern desert and the damage to the public was minimal.

Because the Katchian Emperor didn’t pay much attention to the incident, Yuder personally sent a few members to investigate, confirming that Star of Nagran had completely collapsed and there was no chance of regrouping.

However, a few years later, after Yuder had been away from the Empire for a long time to investigate a massive earthquake that marked the beginning of a disaster, and the appearance of a monster from a crevice in the ground, he unexpectedly heard the name again among the rumors in the social circles.

There was a rumor that a sage, leading numerous followers, was traveling all over the continent, teaching foreign kings and nobles, and the name of this follower group was called Star of Nagran. There were even some imperial nobles who went abroad to meet him.

As time passed, the sage and Star of Nagran grew their influence, resembling a massive religious group. At that point, even the Katchian Emperor started to show interest in the sage, who appeared in the Sun Palace, looking like an old and wise mage that people typically imagined.

Although the sage quickly captured the heart of the Katchian Emperor, Yuder could not shake off his suspicions. After investigating him secretly for a long time, he found out that the sage was an Awakener with the ability to influence people's moods and was connected to the former terrorist group 'Star of Nagran'. On the orders of the Katchian Emperor, Yuder killed him.

That incident had made many enemies for Yuder. While the sage was dead, his fanatical followers remained scattered in various places, even within the ranks of the Cavalry. Even the Katchian Emperor, who had ordered Yuder to kill the sage, had become increasingly paranoid and had come to trust no one, leaving Yuder with the feeling that he had lost more than he gained.

The name "Star of Nagran" might have been insignificant compared to the countless natural disasters that had struck the continent. However, Yuder considered it as one of the biggest disasters in a tangible sense.

‘I intended never to let such charlatans appear in this life… I can’t believe I’m seeing this preliminary battle here.’

The image of the Star of Nagran that remained in Yuder’s mind was primarily of the sage who led the religious group and his followers. Therefore, after he returned 11 years to the past, he believed there was no need to worry about the Star of Nagran.

He thought it would be a group that hadn’t even been formed yet, so he planned to casually conduct Cavalry activities and then immediately beat up anyone who looked suspicious, potentially the future sage. However, seeing Nahan in front of him now made him question that judgment.

‘If the Star of Nagran existed much earlier than I thought, there’s a high probability that the internal division that occurred in my previous life wasn’t fully understood by the investigation back then.’

The members of the investigation team Yuder had dispatched in his previous life reported that the cause of their division was a power struggle between a faction trying to ally with nobles and a faction that wanted to shun them. If everyone had the same mind, they would not try to join hands with the nobles who looked down on the Awakeners, but when several people gathered, power naturally divided.

Among the followers of the Star of Nagran that Yuder had met, there was no Nahan, so Yuder hypothesized that Nahan might have died when the Star of Nagran first collapsed in his previous life.

‘A group made for the Awakeners… Its purpose is not less than Kishiar’s.’

But the difference between Kishiar, who tried to save as many people as possible, and Nahan, who was willing to kill anyone for his goal, was quite stark.

Nahan, who could not guess Yuder's complex feelings, seemed to think that Yuder agreed with him because there was no answer. He raised the corner of his distorted lips and smiled.

"Do not interfere, brother. I've already taken care of everything here. Only that guy remains."

"Uh, ugh!"

As soon as Nahan finished speaking, Beltrail, who had collapsed as if dead, writhed and moaned. Yuder did not look at him but frowned and spoke.

"Where did you take the Awakeners trapped here? You couldn't have let them go already."

"Well, where could they be?"

Yuder turned his gaze away from Nahan, who showed no signs of answering. He noticed many footprints and the marks of cart wheels among the fallen bodies. The marks led into the forest. Considering Kishiar had said there was a graveyard and a prayer hall in the west of Apeto's mansion, the only place that could hide a large number of people would have to be there.

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Chapter 137

‘It seems quite obvious where theyre hidden but the fact that I appear to have come here alone is nagging at me.’

Nahan’s illusionary abilities are impressive, but they are not enough to evacuate a crowd of people. Surely, the probability of having at least one ally nearby was high.

On the other hand, it would take quite a while for Yuder’s companions, Ever and Gakane, who had completed their individual missions and discovered Yuder’s absence at the rendezvous point, to reach this location.

‘I did leave a signal inside the underground tunnel but still, it will take some time.’

In fact, he didn’t think being alone was necessarily a disadvantage. Against someone with abilities like Nahan’s, having a large group could even be a hindrance. The only concern was the warning that Kishiar had drilled into his ears, not to get hurt.

…Remember, what’s most important isn’t the mission, but your safety and lives.

…

After a moment of silence, Yuder shook his head, dispelling the voice of Kishiar that echoed in his mind.

‘What about this situation?’

The priorities do not change regardless of the situation. The primary task was to find and protect the Awakeners, and the next was to suppress Nahan and save Beltrail’s life. As Yuder clenched

his sword hand and steeled his resolve, Nahan, sensing something amiss, extended a hand to stop him.

Dont move. You have a dangerous power, brother. If you come any closer, Ill have no choice but to use mine.

Go ahead.

With no hesitation, Yuder continued walking into the forest. Nahan, with a frown, curled his lips up in a smirk.

I cant tell if youre brave or if you have another trick up your sleeve. If thats what you want then…

The moment Nahan put power into the hand he stretched towards Yuder, Yuder saw Beltrail, who had been writhing behind Nahan, suddenly go limp. It was proof that Nahan had withdrawn the power he'd been using in the area around him - the very opportunity Yuder had been waiting for.

Now!

Yuder immediately crouched low and sprinted full speed towards Nahan. The wind power beneath his feet flared, exponentially increasing his speed.

Seeing the surprised Nahan dodge to the side, Yuder charged into the created space and grabbed the back of the fallen Elder Beltrail with both hands, throwing him into the entrance of the underground tunnel behind him.

Thud!

Seeing Beltrails body roll down into the dark tunnel, Yuder didnt stop. He immediately changed direction again and ran towards the forest.

‘Although the illusion power is strong, it ultimately only works within the set range. There’s bound to be a gap when the range is changed. Besides, no matter how strong the illusion, it can’t affect everyone in the same way. That’s your weakness.’

Yuder and Nahan had already measured each other’s power in the East. At that time, Yuder hadn’t quite caught on to when Nahan was changing the range of his power and had suffered a great deal. But this time was different.

From that experience, Yuder had learned that Nahan barely moved when using his abilities. When focused, he could distinctly feel the faint energy, like a mirage, stretching out from Nahan’s fingertips.

Nahan, too, having seen how relentlessly Yuder could break through his illusions, felt his guard rising considerably more than before.

To face someone capable of shattering illusions so quickly, one needed to use equally powerful strength. However, having already exerted considerable power in dealing with Beltrail’s group, he didn’t think he had enough strength left to restrain Yuder as he had done before.

‘And once I find the Awakeners and his comrades in the forest, the odds will be in my favor.’

The more people one had to protect, the harder it was to use power, a principle that applied to everyone. The 20 Awakeners thought to be in the forest were beings that Yuder had to protect at all costs. However, the fact that this also held true from Nahans perspective was crucial.

If Nahan recklessly demonstrated his illusions as before, and Yuder unleashed his power indiscriminately, it would ultimately be he and his comrades who suffered.

‘If it were like before, I would have turned this forest upside down and ended it.’

But how could he help it when someone’s words, instructing him not to hurt anyone, kept nagging at the corner of his mind? Thanks to the map Kishiar showed him before he came here, Yuder did not wander and found the sanctuary right away.

In front of the beautiful sanctuary, built in an ancient style, a few unfamiliar men were loitering. They were taken aback by the sight of Yuder and Nahan rushing toward them.

“Who… is that?”

“Stop him! Don’t let him in!”

Nahan shouted sharply. But by the time he had said that, Yuder had already kicked off the ground, took a step in mid-air, and landed on the roof of the sanctuary.

“Hosanna!”

As Nahan desperately called out, seemingly summoning someone, Yuder ruthlessly struck the skylight on the sanctuary roof with his sword.

Crash!

The thick colored glass depicting the symbol of the Sun God shattered in an instant and fell downwards. Yuder jumped through the broken glass.

‘I’ve found the right place.’

The sight that greeted him as soon as he landed confirmed that he had found the right destination. The space, cleared of all interior furniture, was filled with shabby carts. People lying powerless or

crouching on top of them opened their eyes at the loud noise, looking up at the uninvited guest. Yuder sighed as he saw some of them panting feverishly.

‘Is it the fever caused by being in heat?’

A rough count told him that there were just over ten people there.

“Who… who are you exactly?”

One of the more intact-looking Awakeners coughed and asked while I was observing them.

“It doesn’t seem like you’re the ones who saved us… how did you…”

“I am Yuder Aile, a member of the Cavalry following the Emperor. I’m here to protect you and get you out of here.”

Upon hearing his swift answer, they widened their eyes at the sight of the uniform he wore.

“The Cavalry…? The Emperor… Then who are the people who saved us?”

“They are…”

Just as he opened his mouth to answer, there was a loud bang from outside. Yuder tightened his grip on his sword and moved forward.

“I apologize, but do you know where the other people who were with you are now?”

“If you’re talking about the Omegas… they took them elsewhere to separate them from those in heat.”

At those words, Yuder paused for a moment.

‘The ones here were Alphas.’

He was really lucky he hadn’t manifested his second gender yet. Even with several Alphas in heat nearby, he hadn’t even known they were Alphas.

“Those who brought you here are a group of Awakeners known as Star of Nagran. There isn’t enough time to explain everything now, but you must never follow them.”

“Star of Nagran…?”

“I’ll go to fetch the Omegas, in the meantime, if someone comes in, scream to alert me.”

After uttering these words, Yuder carefully approached the door, holding his breath.

‘Can’t hear a thing.’

After counting to three in his mind, he swung open the door, revealing an empty hallway. Across from the large prayer room where Yuder had been, there was a smaller one. Those who had been there were already gone. Yuder ran towards it, recognizing another door behind the open one, and moved quickly.

“Nahan!”

“Damn it, they’re here! Release them quickly!”

Exiting through the back door, Yuder saw several men moving a group of people. They were the same ones he had seen outside the chapel. Spotting Yuder, they blocked the way, brandishing their swords with grim expressions.

“We wouldn’t face a brother, but we have no choice. We need to buy some time…!”

“Stand aside.”

Yuder attempted to brush past them and pursue the disappeared ones, but the energy swirling around the men’s brandished swords followed swiftly and flexibly, preventing him from doing so. They seemed to have been harmonized for a long time, skillfully pushing Yuder from both sides. Although they appeared tense and their swordsmanship wasn’t particularly impressive, the blue energy bound to their swords was undeniably threatening.

Yuder instantly drew his sword to confront them. A common sword wouldn’t have lasted a few seconds against the blue energy wielded by his opponents and wouldve shattered instantly. However, the sword given by Kishiar was anything but ordinary. As it effortlessly withstood the energy akin to a sword aura, the two Awakeners couldn’t help but reveal their disconcerted expressions.

“He uses fire and wind, and now he’s good with a sword too?”

“I told you he’s not a common brother!”

“No matter what…argh!”

Did you really think I, who have lived and rolled around for over a decade in this business, would be pushed back by novices like you?

Yuder, regretting that he couldn’t respond, seized an opportunity and forcefully knocked away one man’s sword. Then, he exerted force towards the iron that made up the other mans sword, making it whirl in different directions, instantly losing all its functions as a weapon.

“By God, is he human?!”

“Run…Ugh!”

Before they could finish their sentences, Yuder remorselessly lifted his leg and struck their heads. That alone was sufficient to knock out the two disarmed men.

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Chapter 138

The best part of coming back to the past, without a doubt, is having a young body.

In his previous life, he was constantly in a state of ill health after having suffered life-threatening injuries. Despite receiving treatment, there was a limit to its effectiveness. Towards the end, he had to start his day by chewing on herbs for pain relief as if it was his meal. Compared to that, his current state, where he could move swiftly as he pleased, felt like heaven.

“Gayle, Doyle! It’s your turn now! Quickly…!”

Just as Yuder was about to step over the unconscious men, a stranger appeared, poking his face out from between the trees. Startled, he quickly retreated. It was a young man with the typical southern complexion, a strong red tint to his skin.

“You’re the Cavalry member that Nahan spoke of…?”

“Hosanna. Don’t come any closer.”

Then, Nahan appeared from behind the man, grabbing his shoulder as if to protect him and pushing him behind. Yuder, feeling no signs of threat from the two, strained his senses towards them and opened his mouth.

“Where did you take the Omega Awakeners?”

“The brothers and sisters are no longer here.”

“…Gone?”

“Yes. By now, they’ve probably met with their other siblings far away. Unfortunately, you’re a step late.”

There was only one logical deduction left since the words didn’t imply that the Omega Awakeners were killed. Yuder looked directly at the young man who seemed extremely strained behind Nahan and asked,

“So, you’re the teleporter?”

“How did you…?”

Hosanna, the young man, looked momentarily taken aback as if he’d been exposed. His face was a picture of confusion, unable to comprehend how Yuder had deduced it.

‘Well, the reason why we employed the Eldore siblings was because of their teleportation ability.’

The teleportation ability of the Eldore siblings, although quite limited, was most useful in unexpected circumstances during missions like this. If Yuder had successfully helped the Awakeners escape, they planned to use that ability in the most heavily guarded section leading from the underground passage to the outside world.

Teleportation is a rare ability that’s hardly even heard of nowadays, but it wasn’t so in the future. By the time Yuder was nearing his end, there were quite a few exceptional teleporters within the ranks, assigned to assist the members dispatched for urgent missions.

‘In any case, they also have a teleporter. As expected.’

Just because they both have the same teleportation ability, their skill levels can differ greatly. It’s impossible to gauge how capable that young man might be. But a teleporter who not only assisted Nahan and his colleagues to escape but also transported nearly ten

Omega Awakeners, judging from his previous life's experience, couldn't be of a weak ability.

That explains why Nahan was calm, despite stirring up trouble in one of the four most heavily guarded ducal mansions in the capital. Because he had such a person with him.

'Always prepares a secure escape route before getting into any work, just like last time. Such a cunning guy.'

During the tense standoff, Hosanna, the young man with a hardened face, pointed toward two of his colleagues lying at Yuder's feet and asked.

"…Are my colleagues dead?"

"They've only passed out."

"I see."

Hosanna let out a sigh of relief, only to have Nahan seize his arm and push him back.

"That's enough confirmation. We can't save those two right now. We must retreat."

"But, Doyle and…."

"The moment I step any closer, I might end up just like them. Is that what you want?"

"No, of course not. But if we just turn back like this, I wonder what he would say…"

Nahan, seeing the faint-hearted Hosanna, coldly retorted and looked towards the prayer house with a hint of regret.

“I regret not being able to save everyone, but we’ve done our part. He’ll understand. We can save Gayle and Doyle later. So…”

‘Huh. As if someone would just stand by and let that happen.’

Just as Yuder was about to chime in, looking incredulous, he heard his name being called from a distance.

“Yuder!”

Yuder paused unknowingly for a moment. Seizing the opportunity, Nahani quickly urged Hosanna on.

“Quickly, Hosanna!”

A burst of light erupted from Hosanna.

“Yuder, are you alright?”

Before Yuder could even raise his hand to attack, the two vanished in the blink of an eye. Following their disappearance, Gakane appeared, having run up with his shadow clone. His gaze rapidly scanned the two men collapsed at Yuder’s feet and the open prayer house.

“What happened? There are a ton of corpses over there…”

“…It’s been eventful.”

Yuder glared at the spot where Nahan and Hosanna had disappeared, then turned away.

“Bind the unconscious ones here and have the clone carry them. Some of the Awakeners who were imprisoned in the annex are inside the prayer house. They need to be taken as well. Where’s Ever?”

“Ever has successfully rescued Dandenion. But since you weren’t at the promised location and the passage was filled with bodies, plus the signal you left… Ever went to relay the news to the Commander, and I came here first.”

“Good job. Did you see the Elder Priest Beltrail inside the passage?”

“Ah, yeah.”

Gakane scratched his head, giving a somewhat awkward smile.

“He fainted after screaming at the sight of me… But he’s alive.”

“What about the evidence I told you to find in the annex basement?”

“There was more left than I expected, so I filled my pocket and buried the rest on the floor. That should be fine, right?”

“Yes. That’s sufficient.”

Though he hadn’t expected things to turn out this way, he was relieved that Nahan’s comrades hadn’t made it to the main building where Kishiar was. Kishiar, having heard the news, would take care of the rest. It felt incredibly comfortable knowing he didn’t have to bear all the responsibility alone.

Thinking about Kishiar, who should be rescuing the third prince, Revlin, and dealing with the raging Duke Apeto, Yuder sighed deeply. After catching his breath, he only then noticed the subtle throbbing in his gloved fingers.

Despite trying to use as little strength as possible, it seemed there was still some strain. Thanks to the gem embedded in the sword and the strap given by Enon, the progress of the pain was slower than before, a fortunate turn of events.

“Yuder. Are you feeling okay? You didn’t get hurt somewhere else, did you?”

Despite only glancing at his fingers, Gakane seemed to sense something was off, looking over at him with concern. Yuder quickly composed his expression and shook his head.

“No.”

“But you seem….”

At the tail end of his words, Gakane tilted his head and extended a hand to touch Yuder’s forehead.

“What’s going on…?”

“You don’t seem feverish….”

“I’m fine. Just leave me alone.”

Yuder brushed away his hand lightly and started walking towards the prayer house.

“If you’re not feeling well, you can’t hide it like before. If you suppress your pain, it will only get worse. Understand?”

Ever since seeing Yuder’s arm turn completely dark purple due to the enlargement of the small spot in the East, Gakane’s worries had noticeably increased. To be honest, even if both of Yuder’s arms were gone, he would still be much stronger than Gakane. However, seeing the sincere worry in Gakane’s eyes, he couldn’t bring himself to say that.

Yuder sighed, looking at the red-haired handsome man following him, full of worry and nagging.

“Let’s go quickly.”

—

The day when everyone had their eyes fixed on the potential emergence of the first-ever noble-born Cavalry member had passed, and the Capital was once again in an uproar, this time for a different reason.

“My goodness, the Elder Priest Beltrail was caught doing awful things with dozens of Awakeners. I attended the service he held at the Grand Temple once, and I would’ve never imagined him capable of such things.”

“How could a priest who serves God do such things? It’s no wonder he ended up like this!”

Enon, a man with a head full of ashy hair, was passing by the people chattering excitedly in the market when he suddenly stopped to listen. All day long, wherever he went, everyone was talking about the same thing: the terrible incident that had occurred at the Apeto House the previous day.

“The third prince, who was the problem child, has only been left as an honorary member of the Cavalry. Ultimately, the entire Apeto House has canceled all festival schedules and has declared they won’t be receiving any visitors. Looks like they’ve lost.”

“In the end, the only winner is Duke Peletta. Wasn’t it the Cavalry who discovered that terrible thing?”

When the conversation shifted to the Cavalry, the people, who had been adding their own comments to the conversation, wore different expressions, filled with anticipation and excitement.

“Haha. That’s right. The commoner members of the Cavalry were the ones who discovered it, which must have hurt the pride of the nobles! They must’ve closed the mansion doors out of shame. Honestly, it’s refreshing to see.”

“How many servants went to work for that family only to end up dead? In the past, I used to be a bit scared whenever I saw an Awakener, but thanks to the Cavalry, I don’t feel that way anymore.”

“Right. Doesn’t Amber from the upper house has a daughter who’s an Awakener? Haha. Who knows, she might join the Cavalry when she grows up. That would be a real rise to success…”

After hearing that, Enon started moving again. The place he stopped at was a small fruit shop, fitting for the humble market.

“Two lemons.”

The young shop owner, who had been busily moving boxes, didn’t bat an eye at Enon’s abrupt request for lemons.

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“Enon, isn’t it time you started eating something other than that?”

“Just give me what I want, you bastard.”

“I’m busy right now. So just leave a coin here and take what you need.”

Enon tossed a coin into an empty can placed next to the fruit boxes and picked up two lemons. He put one in his pocket and began eating the other one like any ordinary fruit. Watching him do this, the young shop owner scrunched up his nose.

“I’ve always been curious about how you could possibly eat that so casually.”

“Do you want to stop doing business here?”

“To be honest, after five generations, I wouldn’t mind quitting if I could.”

After this cool reply, the young man moved all the fruit boxes and turned around to wipe the sweat off his brow.

“But judging by the fact that you’re still here… do you need something else?”

“I’m curious if anything unusual is happening around here.”

“Nothing much today. You must know about what happened in Apeto yesterday.”

The shop owner nonchalantly responded to Enon’s question, then suddenly let out a small “Ah.”

“Speaking of Apeto, there is one thing that comes to mind.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s not much, but you know the Cavalry that recently delivered a huge blow to the Apeto House?”

“The Cavalry?”

“Yes, that’s right. The Cavalry. They’re looking to hire some people.”

The shop owner laughed softly at his mistake, took off his hat, and sat down on the small chair in front of the stall.

“What’s so interesting about hiring servants?”

“Well, they’re not hiring servants per se, they’re looking for a physician and a pharmacist.”

Enon, who had been expressionless, showed a slight change in his eyes at these words.

“A physician and… a pharmacist.”

“Quite unusual, isn’t it?”

The young fruit shop owner’s mouth curled up into a satisfied smile.

“The local doctors and pharmacies have already heard the rumors. It’s a place set up by the Duke of Peletta, so naturally, people assumed that they would only use the highest grade holy water for treatment from the Temple. So why do you think they’re looking for a physician and a pharmacist?”

After chewing and swallowing the last bit of his lemon, Enon licked his lips.

“I’m not sure. But it does sound intriguing. So, are they offering good pay?”

“Why? Are you interested, Enon? Haha.”

Despite his mocking tone, the young man didn’t really expect Enon to show any positive interest. Therefore, when Enon, who had been thoughtfully chewing on his lemon, nodded his head, the young man was taken aback enough to nearly slide off his chair.

“Really?!”

“Yes. So, tell me where to apply.”

“No joke, you’re serious? It’s not like you’re short of money, right?”

“Noisy are you. I asked where I should go.”

“Wow, there really is a first time for everything.”

The flustered young man, getting to his feet, informed him that there was an inn nearby where several members of the Peletta Knights were staying long-term. He suggested Enon could apply there. Instead of a verbal response, Enon flicked another coin from his pocket toward the young man.

“Take it. I’m off.”

“Yes, do take care.”

Watching the young man smiling cheerfully as if nothing had happened, Enon clicked his tongue and strolled leisurely toward the inn he’d been directed to. Along the way, he noticed people talking about the incident that had occurred at the Apeto clan’s place the previous day.

Given the festive period, it was truly a remarkable situation. Yet, Enon understood their excitement. After all, the scandal of one of the four ancient ducal houses, tracing back to the founding of the Empire, had been made public. What could be more thrilling?

For a while now, the Apeto House had been conducting cruel experiments they should not have, using the Awakeners. Fearful that the Duke of Peletta and the Cavalry would discover the truth, they hid the test subjects deep within their estate's forest. However, this act ironically led to an accident, unveiling their secret.

The exact cause of the accident remained undisclosed, but given that the Duke of Peletta announced that some of the Awakeners who were undergoing experimentation had vanished, most people suspected that the missing ones had sparked the incident.

What everyone found most intriguing was the fact that as a result of the accident, Beltrail, the Elder Priest who had been overseeing the research, went mad. Furthermore, several assistants and servants who had been under his command perished.

The Duke of Apeto naturally wished to question him about the incident, but since the Cavalry and Duke of Peletta were first on the scene, preserving the site and summoning the imperial security forces, he was unable to do so. News of the incident spread like wildfire.

The Emperor, foreseeing a potential conflict between the two Dukes, had placed security forces on standby just outside the mansion. Who could have predicted such an event? There were credible rumors suggesting that even this was a divine arrangement for revealing the unjust incident.

After calmly investigating the scene, Kishiar La Orr, Duke of Peletta freed the detained Awakeners and accused Elder Priest Beltrail from the Temple. Beltrail, who had lost his mind, could not defend himself, but no one offered him help. The Temple,

recognizing the gravity of the situation, expelled Beltrail from his position as Elder Priest within a day and announced that they would investigate the ripple effects.

The Apeto House claimed that Beltrail alone had committed all the deeds. However, as soon as the incident became widely known, they announced they would close the doors of the mansion and refrain from going outside for a while. No one believed their words at face value.

Kishiar did not slacken the noose he had thrown around the neck of the Apeto House. He immediately sent an open request to the Emperor for the Cavalry to investigate the incident. His sweeping proclamation promising not to miss a single detailwhere Beltrail had collected the Awakeners to be studied, how many people were involved in his researchhad the people at peak excitement.

According to imperial law, nobles too were to be punished for their crimes, but in reality, such events seldom occurred. However, this time the one to investigate them would be the Cavalry, led by the Emperor’s brother, Duke of Peletta. Everyone believed this was the perfect opportunity to deliver a significant blow to the Apeto House, which had been at odds with the Emperor.

The obscure fact that the Cavalry had the authority to investigate and punish any incidents related to the Awakeners was etched into everyone’s minds due to this incident. Now, no one cared about the previously intriguing incident concerning the third son of the Apeto House.

Enon walked past the visibly excited crowd. He halted his steps in front of a dilapidated two-story inn on the verge of collapse, “The Giant’s Sleep.”

“Enon. It’s been a while,” someone greeted.

The middle-aged man, who had been sitting at the table trimming vegetables, lit up with a welcoming expression as soon as he saw Enon.

“What brings you here? I have nothing more to say about the guest you asked about before…?”

Enon had visited him a while back, asking about the people who had stayed at The Giant’s Sleep before taking the Cavalry test. Two people had lodged there before heading to the test, but the owner only remembered a handsome man with flamboyant red hair. It took him a while to remember the pale man with black hair who was with him, and even then, he could only vaguely recall his existence.

Enon paid little attention to the owner’s apologetic face, and glanced towards the staircase leading to the second floor, where the guests’ rooms were. He promptly broached the subject at hand.

“Nevermind that. I heard the Knights of Peletta are staying here. Where are they?”

“Oh, the ones who were interviewing all day for a physician and pharmacist.”

The owner’s face brightened up even more at the familiar topic.

“They’re still here. They’ve been taking turns guarding room three. I asked them this morning if they knew anything about the incident in Apeto yesterday, but they seemed clueless. Did you come here because you’re curious about that, Enon?”

“No, not really.”

Enon left the talkative owner behind, who was keen on discussing the recent event in Apeto, and promptly climbed the stairs.

“Eh? Then why are you here? You’re not here for the interview, surely”

The voice of the owner, tilting his head in confusion as he considered that unlikely possibility, no longer reached Enon’s ears. What filled his mind was the face of a man who had visited him not long ago, shaking up his monotonous life with a substantial ripple.

Even after deciding to write off the man who casually claimed to have come back from the future as a madman, something about him continued to nag at Enon.

Despite the fact that nothing seemed remarkable about his origin, the dormant power within him was mind-boggling, a fact that stirred Enon. He hadn’t felt this way in a long time.

“Well… strange man. I’ll see for myself whether you really reversed time or not.”

Enon briskly opened the door to the room where the Knights of Peletta were staying and entered, dismissing the idea that someone else might be chosen from his mind.

—

At that moment, Yuder was sitting in the Cavalry Commander’s office, quietly extending his gloveless hand. Each time Kishiar, wearing the holy symbol, channeled his divine power, the purplish spots spreading on the back of his hand disappeared, accompanied by a prickling pain.

“I’m glad I can fulfill my promise to you.”

“…Yes.”

“Lift your head. Seeing that it didn’t spread much, I can tell you’ve put in the effort.”

Despite his words, one could only wonder how many people in the world could look straight into Kishiar's chilly smile. As Yuder sighed and lifted his head slightly, Kishiar smiled softly, gently gripped his fingers, inspected the palm of his hand, then flipped it back to its original position.

"Good. It seems to be all cleared up. You may put your glove back on."

"Thank you."

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Once he saw that Yuder had put on his gloves, Kishiar turned to Nathan Zuckerman, who had been standing quietly behind him, and ordered him to fetch some snacks. It was an unusually mundane command to give to a man said to be the continent's greatest swordsman, but he complied without a hint of dissatisfaction, stepping back discreetly.

"Well, let's begin our discussions that we need to tackle now. First, about these people called the Star of Nagran."

Since the incident at the Apeto House yesterday, Kishiar had been working non-stop. Even when unexpected events unfolded, he neither blinked nor hesitated, relentlessly pressuring the Apeto House. Simultaneously, he was striving to extract everyone, including Revlin and Dandenion, as well as the two Awakeners belonging to the Star of Nagran, whom Yuder had protected.

At the end of an all-night offensive, when the Apeto Duke finally declared that he would refrain from stepping out for some time, Kishiar finally allowed himself to sit. Though he must have desired rest, his eyes remained clear and bright, seemingly immune to fatigue.

Observing him, Yuder found himself faintly reminded of his past self, who used to gaze off into the distance with tired eyes. It was a minute difference, but a vast change nonetheless.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"No… nothing."

Caught off guard, Yuder quickly lowered his head and regained his usual expression. Fortunately, Kishiar didn't probe further and

immediately began his discourse.

“Based on the information shared by you and the Awakeners we’ve rescued from the Apeto House, we plan to initiate a primary exploration into the Star of Nagran. Nathan confirmed what you heard, ‘Nagran’ does indeed mean ‘paradise’ in the southern language.”

“I see.”

“It certainly seems there’s some connection with the south. But the south is a place where understanding the political climate is more difficult than in other regions… For now, we plan to interrogate the two you’ve captured once they’ve woken up and calmed down. We need to know who ‘he’ is and understand the purpose and direction of their organization.”

The two men Yuder had knocked out with a precise hit to the mandible were still unconscious, quarantined in an empty room.

‘Were their names Gayle and Doyle?’

Considering the words spoken right before Nahan disappeared, they would likely come to reclaim their comrades at some point. Of course, he had no intentions of handing them over easily, but it would be beneficial to glean as much information as soon as possible for the Cavalry.

“May I take responsibility for the interrogation of those two?”

“You?”

“After all, I was the one who captured them.”

Kishiar looked at Yuder’s face for a moment before replying with a faint smile, “Very well.”

“But remember, it should only be a conversation. Do not intimidate them.”

“For that part, I’ll ask Kanna for help.”

“That’s a good idea.”

With her ability to read information, Kanna had a knack for quickly befriending strangers. Her ability to rapidly break down emotional barriers would undoubtedly be beneficial in this situation.

“And regarding the Awakeners we’ve brought back from the Apeto House.”

“Yes.”

Yuder responded, recalling the Awakeners he had saved and brought from the prayer house. Among the twelve Awakeners who were thought to be Alphas, only five turned out to be true Alphas. Among those, four had entered the mating period. The remaining Awakeners had been part of Beltrail’s research, in which he forcibly induced second gender manifestation.

The notion of forcibly manifesting the second gender into an alpha or omega was, to Yuder’s knowledge, unprecedented, even in the future. The thought of how many had been sacrificed to commit such a reckless act made him regret that Beltrail had not lost his mind sooner, before paying the price for it.

“After those in heat get through that period and recover, those who want to return to their hometown will be sent back, and those who don’t, if they wish, will be allowed to work here.”

“Here, you mean?”

“As the lands and buildings for the Cavalry will continue to increase, we need to continuously recruit people. After all, we

planned to fill most of the positions here with Awakeners from the start. I have already assigned Nathan with the related tasks, but in the future, you and the Deputy Commanders will also do so.”

“I understand.”

“You’re not surprised at this reckless plan?”

What was there to be surprised about? Though currently there was barely any administrative or managerial work to attend to, there was no choice but to need people to handle such tasks in the future.

Those who understood and could best aid a Cavalry composed entirely of Awakeners were, of course, those with the same powers. In his past life, Kishiar had done the same thing, and as the size of the Cavalry grew, it was clear his decision was right.

Yuder responded in a word, embedding all his emotions in it.

“I don’t think it’s reckless if it’s something the Commander is doing.”

At those words, Kishiar was silent for a moment. After a pause, the corners of his lips drew a graceful arc upward.

“Sometimes, I feel like you’re a tempting demon who came to tempt me.”

“Temptation, you say?”

When Yuder questioned in disbelief, Kishiar let out a low chuckle.

“You keep on saying sweet words.”

“When did I ever?”

“Now.”

“I didn’t mean to flatter. What I’m trying to say is…”

“I know. No need to explain.”

Looking at Yuder, who was frowning as if trying to gloss over the situation with a joke again, Kishiar murmured with a smile.

“It’s strange. I, who have always learned to doubt myself, when you speak in such a manner, feel baselessly reassured that what I am doing is moving along the right path.”

“…That’s because it is actually moving in the right direction.”

“See. There you go again.”

Saying that, Kishiar leaned his chin on his hand and exhaled with a small laugh. His staring red pupils seemed to pierce through Yuder’s soul.

“How fascinating. I wonder where someone like you came from.”

“…”

“From the start, you were like that. You’ve always had an inexplicable conviction, as if you already knew where my journey was headed.”

At the unfamiliarly low voice, Yuder momentarily hesitated. He could vividly feel Kishiar’s gaze slowly scanning him from his face to his toes. He looked away to avoid reacting to the gaze, but still, his voice penetrated clear and unescapable into his ears.

“I wish I could be the one to answer your inexplicable conviction.”

Only then did Yuder turn his eyes back. Beneath the shade cast by golden eyelashes, he reluctantly opened his mouth to those beautiful eyes shining like a rising sun.

“Do you, perhaps, doubt me?”

Yuder had been trying to keep his identity hidden to the best of his ability, but if Kishiar was to suspect him, the circumstances certainly allowed for it. Of course, he probably harbored more plausible suspicions than the outrageous conjecture of Yuder returning from the future. Despite this, he found it difficult to meet Kishiar’s gaze directly.

“Well, it’s hard to doubt you when you’re so committed to me and the Cavalry.”

Kishiar’s response was succinct. Yuder blinked a few times before replying slowly.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“That in itself is enough.”

After shutting down Yuder’s inquiry in a single phrase, Kishiar casually steered the conversation back to work.

“Anyway, that’s not our immediate concern. With the remaining festivities to wrap up, and dragging Apeto back out of the house theyve sequestered themselves in, we’ll be more than busy enough for one day.”

People had been saying that just by Apeto locking themselves in their mansion, Kishiar and the Emperor had landed a significant blow. But Kishiar made it clear he wasn’t going to stop there.

“…Do you plan to bring something else to light besides the statements of the Awakeners brought from the Apeto family?”

At Yuder’s question, Kishiar responded as if he’d been waiting for it.

“Did you forget? I’m talking about the Hartan case you reported. You said that two of the mercenary Awakeners hired by the Apeto family escaped.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“This morning, the deputy Lord of Hartan sent a letter saying they’ve been found.”

“In that case……”

“I plan to bring all the Awakeners who are still in Hartan, including those two, to the capital for a trial. I have plenty of evidence gathered from before. I’m going to break the Apeto name so thoroughly that anyone who bears it won’t be able to show their face for about a hundred years.”

At his smooth yet resolute words, a faint shiver ran through Yuder.

‘He plans to bring down the Apeto family?’

In his previous life, Kishiar had never hinted at such an intention, let alone voice it. But the man standing in front of him now was casually declaring that he’d been gathering evidence for a long time. What was his intention for revealing this and telling him? Was he testing him because of their earlier conversation? Amidst a slight confusion, Yuder cautiously spoke.

“I beg your pardon, but when you say ‘from before’… do you mean that you had always planned to overthrow the Apeto family?”

“Not just the Apeto family.”

Kishiar’s answer was crisp.

“Every noble family, and all those who parasitize the empire ineffectively, are my targets for cleansing. This is just the beginning.”

At his enormous ambition, Yuder was left speechless.

‘Is he serious?’

As fanciful as it sounded to dream of world domination, Kishiar was utterly calm. Amidst his confusion, Yuder managed to steady his heart and open his mouth again.

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Chapter 141

“I had no idea… that you had such grand ambitions.”

“Of course you didn’t. It’d be problematic if everyone knew.”

“Why then, are you telling me?”

“Do you think you’re just anyone? We’re on the same boat now, in every sense of the word.”

From Kishiar’s side, where a playful smirk had formed, Nathan Zuckerman returned carrying a tray loaded with cake, bite-sized sandwiches, and tea. He interjected with his usual stoic expression.

“You told him?”

“I thought it was time.”

As if he expected it, Nathan set down the tray on the table and pulled out an ordinary-looking envelope from his pocket, handing it to Kishiar.

“This message just arrived. It seems you should check it right away.”

Upon opening the envelope, Kishiar read the single piece of paper inside swiftly.

“They’re moving as expected.”

A mysterious smile appeared on his face moments later. Silently, he laid down the letter, which he’d carefully read and put back into the envelope, in front of Yuder, who was quietly eating his cake.

“Can you guess who sent this letter?”

“No.”

“It’s Aishes Shand Apeto, the current heir of the Apeto Duke family.”

When Kishiar visited the Apeto family, Aishes wasn’t there. He often stayed alone in a different mansion because of his bad relationship with his half-brother and second-in-line heir, Lenore, who was covetously eyeing the heir’s position. This was well-known, so even when a scandal broke out in the Apeto family, there were hardly any direct accusations against Aishes.

Recalling information about Aishes, who died before Yuder could see him in his previous life, Yuder asked.

“Why would he send a letter to you, Commander? Even if he does nothing, his position as heir is becoming more secure.”

“It’s simple. He’s not content with just securing his position as heir anymore. He wants to overthrow his father and become the Duke immediately. He says he’s willing to help us. As payment, he considers handing over the research results of the Elder Priest Beltrail sufficient.”

“…Can we trust him?”

“Of course we can’t. But we have Revlin, don’t we?”

Seemingly delighted that things were moving as expected, Kishiar looked quite pleased. Seeing Kishiar’s smile, Yuder absentmindedly asked a question.

“You couldn’t have planned everything, even the part about Prince Revlin, from the start, could you?”

“Of course not. I wasn’t particularly interested in the Apeto side, but suddenly some good cards came in. We have to use them before

the timing is missed. I believe in not letting go of any opportunities that come to my hand.”

Would the Apeto family, probably having a major headache right now, ever have imagined that the disappearance of a single Cavalry member on vacation in Hartan would push them into such a situation?

Even Yuder himself, who had been working for Kishiar and the Cavalry all this time, never expected that the results of his actions would turn out like this.

Feeling his heart pound heavily, Yuder exhaled softly. It was only then that he truly felt that the beautiful man before his eyes was sincerely striving to achieve a grand goal.

“When did you start all of this? Was the Cavalry also part of your plan, Commander?”

“I’ve had the plan for quite some time. The establishment of the Cavalry was suddenly decided when I awakened… But, well. I would have created it even if I hadn’t awakened. It’s a place that must exist for the stability and peace of the Empire.”

After saying so, Kishiar chuckled lowly, as if lost in thought.

“Initially, I didn’t anticipate the Cavalry to stabilize so quickly. I thought it would take about five years just to get started, but on reflection, you’ve played a huge part.”

Five years. Yuder was taken aback at the fact that this was the preparation time Kishiar had initially planned after deciding to cleanse the giant Orr Empire of its corrupt elements. After the surprise, came a bitter feeling.

The memory of his previous life where he had left the world approximately two years after the Cavalry was founded came to

mind.

Yuder clenched his teeth lightly and lowered his head. He spotted the letter from Aishes Shand Apeto on the table. The request to not publish or pass on Beltrail's research findings to anywhere else, but to him, was particularly lengthy, written in handwriting that could not conceal its excitement.

'The knowledge that such unforgivable deeds were committed in relation to the Blood of Blessing that has been passed down through our family for generations must not be spread elsewhere. The reason I make this bold request to your Grace, the Duke of Peletta, is solely because of that, and there is no other intention….'

Blood of Blessing.

At that moment, Yuder suddenly remembered his conversation with Beltrail and Nahan, which he had momentarily forgotten.

'It was all for the children of noble families suffering because of the 'Blood of Blessing'! Is it a crime to have researched for the children who were born to die from birth?'

'Blood of Blessing, you say. More like 'cursed blood'. If it were truly a blessing, would garbage like you resist it so fiercely? Isn't it all the result of you endlessly coveting forbidden power?'

What was the last thing Nahan had said to Beltrail?

'You're not only coveting the power of God, but now you're trying to covet the power and lives of your brothers. In the grand scheme of things, it would be right to eliminate garbage like you…'

Blood of Blessing and the power of God. A strange feeling suddenly overwhelmed him when he remembered the two unfamiliar terms Nahan had mentioned at the same time.

‘Come to think of it, who does ‘you guys’ refer to?’

Due to the ambiguity of the words, and the fact that Beltrail was almost frantic when confronting Nahan, he had forgotten the conversation, thinking it was not a proper conversation.

“What’s wrong, Yuder? Is there something strange in that letter?”

“No, just this part…”

Yuder shook off a thought that seemed to be on the tip of his tongue and pointed to the part related to Beltrail.

“The words themselves are understandable, but I find it strange that there’s a necessity for such a request.”

“Ah. You mean this part.”

For a moment, a cold, self-mocking smile flashed across Kishiar’s face, then quickly disappeared. It was an expression so unfamiliar that Yuder almost doubted his eyes.

“Well… They’re desperate, too.”

“Pardon?”

“It means that Revlin isn’t the only one born with the Blood of Blessing in the Apeto family. Aishes, Beltrail… they’re all somewhat different, but they were famous for being frail and not in good health. Do you understand?”

Upon hearing that, Yuder finally understood why Aishes had insisted on discussing only Beltrail’s research, avoiding any mention of the shame of his family.

“So you intend to repeat the same mistake, even knowing that the research did not yield any meaningful results.”

“No one knows what Aishes will do once he gets his hands on it. Of course, that’s why I don’t intend to hand it over. We will destroy everything we obtained from there once this matter is settled.”

The notes and documents Beltrail had taken from the annex basement were neatly piled in a corner of the headquarters. According to Gakane, who had brought them and had a quick glance, most of the documents were research reports, and the rest were data collected from various places. Gakane mentioned that there were also writings directly from Beltrail, but there wasn’t enough time to examine them thoroughly.

‘Even Aishes, who seemed relatively quiet among, is like this… There’s no one to be taken lightly.’

He understood very well why Kishiar wanted to confront him using Revlin.

“Have all your questions been answered?”

Immersed in thought, Yuder was playfully asked by Kishiar. Only then did Yuder come to his senses and reply.

“I don’t have any more immediate questions.”

“We’ve got a long way to go. We don’t need to solve everything right away. Now, let’s eat again before the cake waiting for you melts.”

The cake placed in front of them was a rich chocolate cake, with golden powder sprinkled on top and a sweet scent wafting from the white cream. Yuder clenched his lips towards the cake and reluctantly picked up his fork.

‘He seems to be feeding me these things for some reason… He wouldn’t be misunderstanding something, would he?’

Looking up, he saw Kishiar smiling as usual. In the end, Yuder stood up only after he had eaten all the cake that had filled the large plate.

“I’ll be going down now…”

“Go ahead. Oh. Remember, the special award ceremony on the Day of Blessing is coming up in three days?”

Just as Yuder was about to turn, Kishiar suddenly brought up something. The special award ceremony was effectively the last event to wrap up the harvest festival, a schedule for the entire Cavalry to participate in. Of course, he remembered it.

“Yes.”

Just responding to Kishiar’s comment brought back the sweetness left in his mouth. Whether Yuder tried to cover his mouth with his sleeve, Kishiar continued with a cheerful face.

“The tailored suit for the day is arriving tomorrow. No matter how busy you are, don’t miss it and try it on in advance. There might be parts that are not made correctly.”

‘A suit?’

At the unfamiliar term, Yuder tilted his head but soon recalled the conversation.

‘Ah, right. They said they would give a suit made to fit the uniform size to all members for that occasion.’

In his previous life, he had always attended any occasion in his Commander’s uniform, so he had never cared about things like suits. Considering it a waste of time, he even made a new rule after he became the Commander that the members of the Cavalry could wear uniforms on occasion instead of formal wear. He knew that the

nobles laughed behind his back, but he didn’t find it threatening, so it was fine.

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The notion that formal wear was a waste of time hadn't changed, but now was not the time to dwell on such personal opinions. Yuder silently nodded.

"Understood."

"As my Assistant, you'll have slightly different adornments than the others, the Deputy Commander of each Division is also the same. I selected them myself."

"Despite being busy."

Nathan Zuckerman casually chimed in from behind. Kishiar burst into laughter and agreed, "Exactly."

"I don't mean to brag, but I have quite the reputation in the capital's social circles and among fashion designers for having good taste. You can look forward to it."

Yuder had never looked forward to a party in his life, and the day he would revel in wearing formal wear probably wouldn't come, but what could he say in the face of Kishiar's jovial smile?

"…Yes."

Quietly responding, Yuder went down to his quarters. The small room, showing almost no sign of habitation except for a few uniforms and outfits hanging up, remained immaculately cleaned even in his absence.

As he took off his coat and lay on the bed, fatigue that had been lingering seemed to envelop his entire body. With a sigh, Yuder removed his right glove.

At first glance, his hand looked clean, but there was a small purplish spot on the back of his right hand. Despite receiving treatment, both the back and the inside of his hand still held a deep heat and throbbed irritatingly. He hadn't told Kishiar, but Yuder knew that its condition was slightly different from when the spot first appeared.

'Initially, after treatment, it would fully heal. But ever since it extended to my shoulder, even after treatment, some degree of pain and numbness remains like a residual mark.'

Of course, this lingering sensation would disappear over time, but the problem was that it seemed to last longer each time he had treatment. It felt as if an abscess was forming deep within, slowly accumulating, even though it looked perfectly fine on the outside.

'Since divine power alone couldn't heal it completely, it can't be helped.'

What more was needed to cure this strange spot? He felt he might have to see Enon again soon.

Yuder clenched and unclenched his fist a few times and then closed his eyes. Initially, he had planned to immediately go underground, meet the mages, and learn about the progress of their research, but his body felt so heavy that getting up was a struggle. It was probably due to the aftereffects of the treatment.

However, a sudden thought brushed through his mind, forcing his heavy eyelids to snap open.

'…Could this be a sign that my second gender manifestation is near?'

Lowering the hand that was covering his face, Yuder quickly sat up. He retrospectively scrutinized his body condition. The power that filled his body, the serene state of his mana pool, the lack of even a

slight fever, there was nothing different from normal. There were no abnormalities.

Not yet.

Only after he reassured himself several times did the unpleasant sensations and memories that were whirling around his mind gradually disappear.

‘Right. It’s no surprise I’m being oversensitive after meeting so many alphas in heat.’

Yuder took another deep breath, releasing it slowly. He promised himself he must prepare for the second gender manifestation as quickly as possible. The desire to sleep vanished almost instantly, yet his body still felt heavy, suggesting it might be better to rest a little longer before heading out.

—

I’m sorry.

A heavy voice echoed in his mind.

Its not your fault. After all, I was the one who created this situation, its only fair to blame me.

A memory that he had repeatedly reflected upon.

I dont exactly know what has happened to us

A nightmare he had tried to suppress for a long time, only to repeatedly fail.

.

.

.

Yuder! Didnt you hear me?

Yuder shook the lingering voice from his mind and looked blankly downward. Kanna, who had her box of formal clothes tucked under her arm, was offering him another box, her face full of suspicion.

This is yours.

Hmm. Thanks.

Yuder awkwardly accepted the box Kanna held out. They were in the lounge to receive their formal clothes for the upcoming party. Everywhere, members of their group were busily unboxing and inspecting their formal attire, filling the room with noise and excitement. Seeing their laughter full of excitement, Yuder felt a moment of clarity.

Youve been absent-minded since this morning. Are you really not ill?

No, Im not.

But you ate less than usual. I mean, you’re the person who recently ate more than ten pieces of bread, but today you only had three. Couldnt sleep well?

No, thats not it either.

When had she started watching him eat? Yuder firmly shook his head, but Kanna’s face remained a mix of worry and doubt.

Even so.

Kanna! Did you find your clothes? We need to go try them on.

Kanna, whose words had trailed off, saw Ever calling from afar. She patted Yuders back lightly and said her farewells.

I should go now. I heard from those who checked earlier that there might be issues with the stitching on the sleeves, so make sure to inspect that part.

Alright.

Her eyes, transparent as glass, took in Yuder’s complexion for a brief yet definitive moment.

Youre really alright?

Yuder finally let out a long sigh, slightly lifting the corners of his mouth.

Im fine.

Alright. If you want to change your schedule for today’s event, I can take over for you. Dont hesitate to tell me.

Seeing her eyes filled with the resolve to help Yuder, no matter what, made him feel somewhat guilty for his recent disarray. Yuder nodded and quietly watched her rush off to join her friends.

The noise around him and the happy atmosphere felt strangely distant, as if he was enveloped in an invisible barrier of air. This peculiar feeling had been dampening his mood since the morning.

The reason… must be the dream I had last night.

Yuder had been tormented by nightmares the previous night. He remembered little, but one dream lingered, resurfacing whenever he tried to forget it, giving him a headache.

It was a dream related to the events that happened after the second gender manifestation in his previous life.

Perhaps it was the worry that had occupied his mind just before sleep that had brought on such a dream, but knowing the cause didn't make it any less bitter.

Every time Yuder remembered that era filled with chaos, he always felt an uncomfortable sensation, as if something was stuck in his throat.

It was a thing of the past, yet also an event that had yet to occur. Despite his unwavering belief that it should never be repeated, he couldn't understand why he felt so complicated, and it irritated him. Yuder lightly brushed his furrowed brow with his hand, gripping the box containing his ceremonial attire.

"Yuder!" "Yuder!"

The ones who stopped him as he was about to head to his quarters alone were Devran and Jimmy. The pair, who had become quite close since the Hartan incident and were often seen together, had already changed into their white ceremonial clothes instead of their usual black uniforms.

"Finally found you. Where were you heading?"

"Back to my quarters to check the ceremonial clothes."

"Why bother going all the way back? There's a changing room nearby."

Devran laughed and pointed to a small room connected to the lounge.

"He's right. You should just change here. I can check if anything's wrong with your attire. My mom used to work in costume design, I'm good at that stuff."

Given such a persuasive argument, Yuder found himself standing in front of the small room, unable to refuse. There were a few more rooms that the Cavalry members were using as changing rooms besides the one Yuder was standing in front of, but one was particularly crowded. Upon noticing Yuder's gaze, Devran and Jimmy shared a glance, grinning.

"Who's inside that room?"

"Just guess."

"Gakane."

"He's got the best face, doesn't he? They're all gawking because they want to get a look."

Yuder was unable to understand how Gakane's handsome appearance was relevant to the situation from that explanation alone. However, the moment Gakane, in his white ceremonial clothes, revealed his face from inside the room, the crowd erupted into cheers and laughter.

"He does look good!"

"You might not be on the Commander's level, but you won't kneel before them, that's for sure!"

"Great. Let's put this guy in the front and give the nobles a run for their money."

"…"

In the midst of the cheers surrounding him, Gakane gave a hollow laugh. Seeing this, Yuder felt a slight pang of sympathy, acknowledging that being handsome wasn't as easy as it seemed. He then stepped into an adjacent empty room. The ceremonial

clothes he took out of the paper box were made of white fabric that shimmered like deep wine, just like the other Cavalry members.

However, unlike the other members' clothes with silver buttons and light blue thread, his clothes were adorned with golden buttons from the sleeves to the chest and belly. Black threads were used generously on the sleeves and hem, making the outfit look heavier and more splendid.

He wondered how much budget Kishiar had spent to make these 300 plus ceremonial attires. He quickly put aside the dizzying thought about the money and took off his uniform, changing into the ceremonial clothes.

"He's out."

"You came out quickly…whoa."

Devran and Jimmy, who had been waiting for Yuder, Gakane, who seemed to have known where he was and joined them with a tired face, and a few Cavalry members who were waiting for their turn to change, all widened their eyes the moment they saw him.

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“…”

“Yuder, your formal attire… its color is a bit different from ours?”

The first to break the silence was Devran. Yuder nodded as he adjusted the sleeves and the collar of his formal attire.

“The Commander said that he had made a different design for the Deputy Commanders and the assistant.”

“Really? I saw Steiber in it earlier but somehow it felt different……”

“Yuder, when you wear that outfit, you completely look like… ah, a highly esteemed person, just like the Commander!”

While Devran murmured as if looking at a stranger, Jimmy, unable to close his gaping mouth, gasped and cried out. Yuder looked down at the clothes he was wearing and opened his mouth quietly.

“It seems that you’re saying that simply because the color of this attire is similar to the Commander’s uniform.”

“No, it’s true! It is so! You look like such a high-ranking noble! Very cool! You look handsome!”

“Hmm… thank you, Jimmy.”

The surroundings burst into laughter at the sight of the boy shaking his hand high above his head and trying hard to express his feelings. At the same time, the previously frozen, quiet atmosphere slowly thawed.

“Yuder, have you ever worn formal attire like this before?”

“No, I haven’t. Why?”

“You look quite comfortable, as if you’ve worn it a lot.”

Gakane, who had approached, picked off a piece of thread from Yuder’s back, which Yuder had not noticed, and smiled.

“You looked good in the black uniform, but you also really suit white. You look elegant.”

“You too.”

The best response to a casual comment is to always turn it back to the speaker. It was one of the most useful rhetoric tips Kishiar from his previous life had taught Yuder.

At Yuder’s response, Gakane scratched his head.

“Haha. It’s natural for me to look comfortable since I’ve worn it a lot. Although this splendid formal attire is my first time.”

“You’ve worn it a lot? Why?”

Unthinkingly questioning, Yuder realized Gakane’s background and stopped his hand that was examining his clothes.

“Ah, you must have had quite a few occasions to attend parties before.”

“No, it’s not just that.”

In Gakane’s eyes, looking down at his formal attire, a bitter but somewhat refreshing color surfaced.

“The occasions when I had to wear formal attire were more often for difficult times than for attending parties. Like, for example,

duels……”

“Yuder. I’ve checked all the way down to the hem of your trousers, and everything’s fine.”

At that moment, Jimmy, who had been checking the clothes with him, interrupted, so Yuder couldn’t hear the rest of Gakane’s words.

“Thank you.”

“Hey, Yuder. I heard that there’s an animated armor knight created by Archmage Luma’s magic in the hall of Deluma Palace, where the party is held. I’m really curious, do you think I’ll be able to see it?”

“Is there something like that? That Archmage fellow must have had a lot of free time. There’s already a lot named after that fellow throughout the capital, he seems to have made everything.”

Devran’s response was exactly the same as Yuder’s thought when he saw the animated armor knight in Deluma Palace in his previous life, causing an unwitting faint smile to appear on his face.

“If you’re lucky, you might be able to see it.”

The fact that all the festival events had gone without a hitch was felt through Jimmy’s bright face. There was still a mountain of work to be done in the future, but that in itself was truly fortunate.

—

“Good day, Mr. Yulman, Mr. Pelgin.”

“Oh. You’ve come despite being busy.”

After finishing his fitting for the formal attire, Yuder went straight down to the basement to meet with the mages. In the meantime,

they had managed to cast more wards, and the atmosphere in the basement was not as heavy as before.

“How is it? Our 24-layered defense line. The pressure is completely gone now, isn’t it?”

Thais Yulman, standing among the massive defensive magic circles shining in various colors from the high ceiling to the walls and the floor, smiled with a content face. His disciple, Alik Pelgin, standing next to him, was extremely gaunt in contrast to his master, but he didn’t hide his pleasure at seeing Yuder.

“You’ve arrived. The magic stones and ingredients that the Duke of Peletta…no, the Commander sent were really helpful. I never dreamed that you would bring us a cart full of magic stones.”

From the look of new furniture and living facilities around them that he hadn’t seen before, it seemed Kishiar had taken quite a bit of care.

Due to receiving more magic stones than he expected, Alik prattled on about how he was able to enhance the defense line from the original 15 layers to 24, all while serving Yuder tea. It was the Pearl Tower’s special research flower tea, which he had also drunk previously.

“Have some. I added something that’s very good for waking up.”

“How is the research progressing?”

When Yuder asked while sipping his tea, Alik smiled and pointed at the Red Stone located not far away. It was still in a transparent box. The only thing that had changed from before was a small white circle drawn around it.

“Do you see the circle over there?”

“Yes.”

“That means the power of our defense line reaches up to there. The power of the Red Stone cannot radiate beyond that white circle. Even a weak mage like me can approach it that far.”

“That’s impressive.”

“Isn’t it? There aren’t many mages who can cast a defense line of this level across the entire continent.”

At Yuder’s compliment, Alik looked proud. Following him, Thais Yulman also added his words.

“You shouldn’t feed into his arrogance. Even though he’s my disciple, he doesn’t know modesty and that’s a problem. If I had done it alone, I could have done it faster, but he drew the circle wrong three times…”

“Oh, Master. Didn’t you see me working through several nights to complete that? It’s a thankless job. Can’t I be happy with this much praise?”

“Tsk, tsk. Go and prepare more materials. You look like you’re still half-asleep.”

At his master’s words, Alik’s face fell as he quickly drank his tea and got up from his seat. Thais clicked his tongue a few more times towards his dejected disciple’s back as if to make him hear, then turned his head towards Yuder.

“We’ve also received all three medium materials we requested a few days ago, in addition to the magic stones. Although the quantity was very small because you had to find them quickly, I didn’t expect you to send them so soon. Honestly, I was surprised.”

“So, are you now making the medium?”

“No. First, I tested how compatible those are with the power of the Red Stone. The fairy dust was useless, but the ancient dragon’s heart and Eucalractium seemed to have a decent compatibility. I need to test a bit more, but I think the dragon’s heart might be better.”

“I see. Then I will request the Commander to procure more of the dragon’s heart.”

“Indeed, one word leads to knowing two. Thank you.”

Thais Yulman stroked his long beard and grinned.

“My apprentice is busily crafting a mold now that we have enough ingredients prepared. As soon as the medium is completed, I plan to conduct an experiment with you and Kanna to infuse it with the power of this stone. Can you help when the time comes?”

“Of course.”

“That’s reassuring.”

After saying this, Thais seemed to remember something and said, “Speaking of which…”

“The festival period is ending soon, right? At the end, isn’t there always a big party at the… Deluma Palace?”

“Yes.”

“I should have been invited to attend, but I really don’t want to go. Why would I leave such exciting research to attend a boring event? The thought of those Pearl Tower folks and other mages makes my head hurt. So, what I’m saying is… this time, can we just exclude me and make that apprentice of mine go with you?”

When Yuder maintained a momentary silence in response to the blunt request of the old mage, Thais snickered, covered his mouth, and lowered his voice.

“I’ll feign illness suddenly, and the rest can be handled by that lad. Almost no one knows we’re here anyway, so there’s no need to worry. Moreover, wouldn’t you need someone to guard this place from your side?”

“I’d have to speak with the Commander, but… I believe they will agree with your request.”

“I thought so? Hehe.”

The image of Alik’s future, dragged to a bothersome party in place of his Master, brought out a twinge of sympathy in Yuder. But having someone to guard the basement while everyone was away was also necessary, so Thais’s suggestion was welcome.

It seemed like Kishiar planned to station the Peletta Knights, led by Nathan Zuckerman, at the residence to guard Revlin, his lover Dandenion, the Awakeners from Apeto House, and the Red Stone in the basement, but Yuder felt that this alone was insufficient.

It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Swordmaster Nathan Zuckerman, but considering the Star of Nagran, home to an illusionist and a teleporter, he believed one could never be too vigilant.

Yuder expressed his concerns to Thais Yulman briefly.

“There were a few incidents recently, so the possibility of intruders is high. I would appreciate if you could be more cautious about security on that day.”

“Don’t worry. I can’t use attribute magic like the others, but I have other methods. As long as I’m here, this place will be safe, no matter who comes! You can rest easy.”

Thais Yulman chuckled and assured the safety of the basement. Yuder also cracked a small smile. With this, the fate of Thais's apprentice Alik Pelgin was also determined.

"I look forward to your cooperation in the future. If you need anything else while conducting your research, please don't hesitate to let me know."

"Ah. Speaking of things I need, something just came to mind."

Suddenly, Thais Yulman's eyes filled with curiosity as he leaned in closer.

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“I’ve heard that you’ve gathered evidence of the horrifying experiments carried out in the Duke of Apeto’s mansion. Is that true?”

“Who did you hear that from?”

At Yuder’s question, the elderly mage simply laughed.

“Hehe. I have ears too. If that’s true, could you perhaps give me a chance to look at it?”

“That can’t be. The experiment is…”

Interrupting the sentence, Thais Yulman raised both of his hands and whispered in an even quieter voice.

“I have no impure intentions. I’m not interested in the purpose or the results of the experiment. However, if there are parts recorded in your investigation of the Awakeners’ power, I thought that I might learn something more when examining the power of the Red Stone. That’s all I want to verify. Is that too difficult?”

At the statement of wanting to find the correlation between the power of the Awakeners and the Red Stone, Yuder momentarily closed his mouth.

The fact that the Awakeners started to appear due to the aftermath of the power that burst out when the Red Stone fell was indisputable. So, he understood why he would say that.

‘Of course, the Elder Priest Beltrail probably didn’t conduct such a useful study…’

After the festival ended, the month that the Emperor had promised was nearing its end. Even if they couldn't discover everything about the Red Stone in that time, they had to find out at least some information about the power within it, in order to ask for more time, or perhaps to participate in the follow-up research.

Noticing Yuder's hesitation, the Elder Mage swiftly added a few more words.

"While my disciple was casting the protective circle, I wasn't just idling around. I have writings, albeit incomplete, that I've been recording while examining the correlation between magic and the power of the Red Stone. If necessary, I can give it to you now. Would you show it to the Duke? It might help when making a decision."

Sighing towards the Elder Mage who was eagerly awaiting an answer, he opened his mouth again.

"I don't think there will be anything you want among the things brought from Apeto. But… I'll bring it up to the Commander."

"Good, good. Now, take this."

Thais, with a grin, handed a few bundles of rolled up papers that were stacked near the table to Yuder. Yuder accepted them and stood up. Not long after he started to move, Alik ran after him and greeted him.

"Are you leaving now?"

"Yes. The tea was good."

"It's my pleasure. Seeing that you look much better than when you arrived here, I am glad."

"…Was my complexion that bad?"

Yuder asked, remembering Kanna who was worried about his complexion before he came down here. Then, Alik made a fuss as if he hadn't known.

"Oh, you didn't know? People who are sleep-deprived and tired usually have swollen eyes and a pale complexion. If left alone, it's likely to develop into a headache, so I intentionally put herbs that wake you up and clear your mind in the tea. It has a bit of an analgesic effect too."

Thinking about it, since waking up from a nightmare, his previously heavy head seemed to have lightened a bit. Yuder sincerely thanked him.

"Thank you. You seem to know quite a lot about this."

"Ha-ha. It's nothing, really. My Master dislikes visiting the shrine yet is quite a hypochondriac, so I've inevitably gained some knowledge in this area."

"Alik! Cut the pointless chatter."

Startled by Thais' sharp rebuke, Alik quickly closed his mouth. Yuder contemplated for a moment before addressing Alik with a question.

"Mr. Pelgin, may I ask you something?"

"There's no need to be so formal. Just call me casually. We'll be seeing each other regularly, and all the formality could get uncomfortable. In return, may I address you simply as Yuder?"

"Understood… Alik."

As Yuder called his name, Alik responded, "Great. What's your question?"

“Alik, you’re a mage, so… if you happen to know someone who sells magic tools useful for defense, could you recommend them?”

“Defense tools? Does someone around need it?”

Alik seemed not to consider that Yuder himself might be the one in need of defensive magic tools. Since the reason for needing such toolsthe manifestation of his second genderwas hard to explain to others, Yuder chose not to correct Alik’s misunderstanding.

“Yes.”

“Hmm. I do have a few single-use items…”

“Single-use?”

“Before I came here with my Master, I asked a friend to make them for me because I was worried. They’re tools that create a shield and provide invisibility for a certain period. However, compared to regular items, their duration and power are somewhat limited.”

“That sounds more than sufficient. Would you be willing to sell them to me?”

“Why would you want to buy it? I’ve received a lot of help from you, so I’ll just give them to you.”

Alik gave a straightforward response and ran off to where his belongings were. After a while, he returned with a small bracelet made of tiny black stones.

“The usage is simple. If you crush one of these strung stones, it activates a shield once. It should protect the wearer from moderate attacks for a few minutes.”

The bracelet was very crudely made. It didn't look like a magical tool at all, but Yuder thought this made it even more suited to his purpose.

"So I can use it five times since there are five stones?"

"That's right. These are fragile, so they can break with just a little force. Be careful."

"Thank you."

Yuder gratefully thanked Alik, resolving to repay him for this favor whenever possible. Magic tools were incredibly expensive, and finding a proper maker was challenging. He had been anticipating a significant expense, so he was relieved at how things turned out.

'It's a blessing that the mages are staying here after all.'

Upon leaving the basement, Yuder immediately strapped the bracelet to the inside of his wrist. Hidden by his uniform sleeve, no one else would notice its presence.

—

That evening, Yuder finally went to meet the two Awakeners from the Star of Nagran, accompanied by Kanna. Even though they had been awake for several hours, their meeting was delayed because they had expressed their wish to meet the Cavalrys person in charge before Yuder sought them out.

Two Cavalry members, who had been stationed in front of the room where the Awakeners were staying, looked up as Yuder and Kanna approached. They quickly recognized them and offered a salute.

"Ah, have you finally arrived? Does this mean we don't need to guard anymore? We were so bored without anything to do."

“No, just stay a little longer until we leave.”

Upon hearing Yuder’s request, the guards agreed without a hint of displeasure and sat back down.

“How are the people inside? They didn’t make any trouble, did they?”

“No, they’ve been quiet even during meals. They sleep so much that it’s suspicious.”

“I see. Please open the door.”

While they waited for the door, locked from the outside with three padlocks, to open, Kanna took a small breath beside Yuder.

“Phew. So it begins.”

“Kanna, if you’re nervous…”

“No, I’m not nervous at all. Trust me, Yuder. I’ll show you the result of all my hard training today.”

Kanna was not scared at all, even when she heard she would be meeting with the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran and would be extracting information from them. On the contrary, she seemed exhilarated at the prospect of finally demonstrating to Yuder the fruits of her training.

“The door is open. You may enter.”

The two of them stepped through the open door. The interior was not much different from the other soldiers’ quarters. The two men, who had been sitting side by side on the bed, sprang to their feet in surprise when they saw Yuder.

“We told you to bring someone important… “

“And so I did.”

At Yuder’s curt reply, the two men exchanged a look.

“Are you the most important person here? We heard that the highest-ranking person is the Commander…”

“I’m the Commander’s assistant.”

“What’s an assistant?”

“I don’t know either.”

“It means someone who works at the Commander’s side like a right hand.”

As Kanna explained to the two bewildered men, their gaze shifted to her.

“And you… who are you?”

“I am the Deputy Commander.”

Strictly speaking, she was one of several Deputy Commanders, but there was no need to go into that detail. Thankfully, they seemed satisfied and sat back down.

“So why did you ask to see someone important?”

“Well… you guys captured us, right? But you haven’t beaten or tortured us yet, even fed us… so we wanted to ask when you were planning to lock us up and start torturing us…”

He seemed uncertain even as he was speaking, but one of the men managed to finish his sentence.

‘Did these guys never receive any training on what to do in situations like this?’

Yuder bit his lip as he looked at the faces of the men who were much more naive than expected. They had fought well, but without their weapons, they were no different from the naive young men one might encounter in a rural area.

Kanna also had a strange look on her face, perhaps sharing his thoughts.

“First of all, I didn’t capture you guys.”

“What, then?”

“After I knocked you two unconscious, your comrades came.”

“Nahan and Hosanna?!”

“Yes, them. But they didn’t try to rescue you and just disappeared, so we brought you in because it would be strange to just leave you there. So technically, we didn’t capture you.”

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It wasn't a lie. The fact that Nahan had indeed disappeared with Hosanna without even attempting to save the two men was undeniable.

The two men stared at each other, their faces reflecting a brief moment of shocked dismay. They seemed at a loss for words, as the response they received was entirely different from what they had anticipated. After a pause, one of the men managed to utter a few words. Unlike before, his tone was hushed and respectful.

"So, you mean to say… Nahan and Hosanna… really left us behind?"

"They did mention going back first and saving you later."

"Lies!"

Unable to contain his anger, the second man interjected loudly, stomping his foot. Yuder calmly responded to their outrage.

"Do you think I'm lying? If you want, I can recite the exact conversation we had back then."

"No way. That's impossible. Hosanna…!"

"Enough, Doyle. Calm down."

The man who had initially spoken in a respectful tone lightly tapped the shoulder of his enraged friend, murmuring quietly.

"We already knew it was hard to trust Nahan, being a tricky foreigner from the south. Even though Hosanna seems kind, he always bows down to his words."

“So, Gayle, are you saying that you believe this stranger’s words?”

“You’re angry because you believe it too.”

As Doyle shut his mouth with a slightly shocked expression, the man referred to as Gayle let out a deep sigh.

“What can we do? We lost and got captured. Since we’ve been fed, we might as well accept it.”

“…”

“Excuse me, are you two brothers?”

The one naturally striking up a conversation with the disheartened men was Kanna.

“Gayle and Doyle. Your names are similar, and you look alike. Where are you from? Judging by your accent, the West, correct?”

In truth, Kanna had already obtained preliminary information from the weapons that Gayle and Doyle had been carrying before she arrived here. Although the information was scant, as the weapons seemed to have been given to them not too long ago, she was able to discern their names, place of origin, and their relationship.

‘Impressive how she can so calmly ask about information she already knows. Her experience is certainly showing.’

While Yuder internally admired her, Gayle and Doyle, oblivious to Kanna’s prior knowledge, responded to her question.

“Correct. We’re brothers. I’m the elder, Gayle, and Doyle’s my younger brother. We did live in the West, indeed…”

“Yuder mentioned you both possess the same ability? That’s quite rare. When did you awaken it? How have you been training?”

“Um… Is it really that uncommon…? We’re not sure… we’ve awakened less than a year ago…”

Among the barrage of rapid-fire questions, not a single one directly mentioned the Star of Nagran. Seemingly under the impression that it was fine to answer these personal questions, the stunned brothers slowly began to reply.

From a step back, Yuder observed as Kanna skillfully altered the atmosphere, blending the information she already knew with the newly learned facts, encouraging the brothers to naturally provide the needed details.

Gayle and Doyle, originally shepherd brothers from a rural area in the West, had been orphans. One day, they had bravely rushed to protect their flock from a beast with nothing but their staffs, and in doing so, they awakened the same ability simultaneously.

Afterward, they recounted how they were driven from their community because they possessed dangerous abilities. Starving and wandering aimlessly, they chanced upon a village where many Awakeners resided. It seemed this place was where the Star of Nagran gathered.

Kanna delicately shifted the conversation when the brothers did not wish to reveal the exact location of the village and who resided there.

“Earlier you mentioned Nahan and Hosanna, what’s their relationship?”

“We don’t really know. They were there before us. But since Hosanna always addresses Nahan as ‘young master’, we assume Hosanna used to be Nahans servant.”

Gayle’s response was followed by Doyle’s grumble.

“I’ve heard that Nahan was a young noble in the South, but he had a near-death experience and came all the way here… I’m not sure if it’s true. Anyway, I don’t like Nahan. He’s not just scary because of his scar, but his eyes are frightening.”

“Right. Hosanna is so kind. Honestly, if it wasn’t for his request, we wouldn’t have come. Nahan never brings any food, yet always expects us to feed him.”

“I bet Hosanna wanted to save us. But that guy must have said just let’s go. Typical.”

Despite their fondness for Hosanna, Gayle and Doyle didn’t hold back in criticizing Nahan. Even though they hadn’t witnessed the events themselves, Yuder surmised from their deductions that Nahan was severely lacking in credibility.

“Could someone else not have come? Why did Hosanna only ask you two?”

“Well, we’re pretty strong. And the followers who are loyal to Nahan are still learning from ‘him’…”

“Him?”

“…”

A look of sudden regret crossed the brothers’ faces, who until then had been answering fluently.

“Ah, well, this is all lies. We didn’t say anything!”

‘Seeing them react like that, it seems that any matter related to ‘him’ is top secret?’

Yuder wanted to probe further, but Kanna judged it wasn’t the right time to dig deeper and smoothly redirected the conversation

with a smile.

“Understood. Then…”

It took considerably longer for the information extraction disguised as conversation to end. They still didn’t know the objective of the Star of Nagran, or who ‘he’ was, but they had gained quite a lot of auxiliary information.

“The Star of Nagran seems to be a unique organization. Just from what the brothers said, it seems like a peaceful village created by the oppressed Awakeners, but it’s not just that when it comes to Nahan. What do you think, Yuder?”

Kanna, having gathered clothes for them to change into, even collecting the garments worn by the brothers Gayle and Doyle, stepped outside and asked with a serious face.

“There’s a high possibility that the organization is divided into two factions internally.”

“Thought so? So Gayle and Doyle would be considered the moderate faction, and Nahan, the hardliner. Their relationship seems worse than expected. And from their conversation, it seems there are quite a few from the Southern region in the organization……”

The ability to quickly extract this much information from a disjointed conversation was something only Kanna could achieve. Yuder looked at Kanna, lost in thought with a slight frown, and sincerely thanked her.

“I’m so grateful you came with me.”

“Isn’t it? I told you to trust only me. Though the information I gleaned from the sword was limited, it was useful for our conversation.”

With a confident pat on her shoulder, Kanna's expression quickly turned serious as she looked down at the worn clothes in her hand.

"But we haven't found out the most important thing yet, so next time we'll definitely figure it out. Until then, I have to hope that these clothes provide more readable information than the sword."

Upon hearing this, Kanna shared how she had continuously trained with the Sun God's scriptures, awake or asleep, and her ability to selectively read information had improved remarkably.

"My ability to read objects that have left my hand is still developing slowly, but being able to read the information in the scriptures much more carefully has made my senses much sharper when conversing with others."

"Your senses have sharpened?"

"Yes. How should I put it? I can feel others' emotions, or vaguely what they're thinking, through my skin."

Kanna smiled sheepishly, admitting that she hadn't told the others for fear of making them uncomfortable with her, but it was a relief to be able to tell Yuder. Yuder nodded, thinking that her recent concern for him was likely due to her power's development.

"Development is good, but if your ability affects your mind too much, it could harm your health. If you ever struggle or find it difficult related to your ability, come to me immediately."

"Of course. Don't worry about me and take better care of yourself, Yuder. You can't show up to the upcoming party looking as pale as you did this morning."

With an unwavering reply, Kanna then disappeared in the direction of her quarters.

‘This morning… that reminds me of the dream I had last night.’

Yuder exhaled a small sigh, his brow furrowed. His mood had dipped slightly as the voice he’d finally pushed to the back of his memory resurfaced.

—

At last, the day that would conclude the harvest festival season had arrived.

The Cavalry, persistent till the end, defended their location from a variety of intricate incidents that happened upon them by chance and grasped a reputation incomparably larger than before. Though still not at the level of the prestigious Imperial Knights or Imperial Mages, the Cavalry’s feats had left quite an impression on envoys from all over the continent, marking a successful start.

Dressed in a white formal suit, Yuder passed by the team members gathered in groups here and there, unable to hide their excitement, and ascended the upper floor stairs. Wearing the soft white suit, which wrapped his arms and legs too gently compared to his familiar and comfortable black uniform, gave him an odd sensation.

‘I hope my attendance at such noisy parties ends this year.’

“Commander, it’s Yuder Aile. I’m coming in.”

Upon reaching the top floor, Yuder knocked on the door, counted to three silently, then pulled the handle.

“Oh, you’re here.”

Kishiar, standing by the sunlit window, turned his head with a smiling face. Like Yuder, he was also properly dressed in a formal suit for the party today.

However, unlike the team members' formal attire made entirely of white fabric, from outerwear to pants, his outfit was rather striking. His underclothes and trousers were white, but his overcoat bore a striking red color resembling his irises, and a traditional gold cape draped over his shoulders gave off an overwhelmingly powerful impression without a gap.

The man, who was conspicuous even when only wearing his usual white commander's uniform, had deliberately dressed in multiple layers of formal attire with gems, and it was to the extent that even the word 'splendid' lost its shine in front of him.

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Chapter 146

“Will you just keep standing there?”

It was only after hearing Kishiar’s voice that Yuder realized he was still standing in the same spot, the door yet to be closed.

“Ah, yes. I apologize.”

“There’s no need for apologies. Those who see this useless opulence for the first time often react similarly.”

Kishiar smiled, adjusting his diamond-encrusted belt and pulling the end of his gloves to straighten his outfit. His expression was as relaxed as ever, but Yuder could feel a keen, predatory tension from the tips of his fingers.

“Given that you call it ‘useless opulence,’ it seems you’re not fond of the formal attire.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Why not?”

“Do you see this?”

With that, Kishiar held up a gloved hand, displaying it for emphasis. The back of the glove was studded with jewel fragments carved into ancient symbols representing eternal blessings.

“This glove alone is valuable enough to feed a small region in the frontier for a few months. But the truth is, it doesn’t need to be this expensive. It doesn’t have any special features, and the jewels used aren’t particularly valuable.”

He lowered his gaze toward Yuder, who was staring at the glove.

“Then why is this glove so expensive? Want to guess?”

“…I heard that items used by the imperial family are only made in designated places…”

“Exactly. The only reason it’s so expensive is because it came from a family of glove makers favored by the fifth Emperor.”

Kishiar waved his gloved hand as if to emphasize his point, then dropped it.

“At the time, it started from a very good intention. Until then, the Emperor had proclaimed that he would begin buying items made by the people instead of those made directly in the imperial palace. But now, even that has become another tradition, and the initial purpose of supporting poor but skilled individuals has completely disappeared.”

The family of glove makers chosen by the fifth Emperor’s favor grew wealthy. In order to retain the wealth and prestige gained from making items for the imperial family, they began to exert their efforts.

The original intent vanished. Those who questioned why only they could provide gloves for the imperial attire gradually disappeared. As the tradition of buying gloves only from the designated place solidified, the makers began to put an even higher price tag on the gloves sent to the palace.

In comparison to the total budget used in the palace, the price was not that substantial. The palace administrators simply saw it as a normal tradition, gladly accepting the sweet bribes and letters sent by the makers. Thus, the transaction continued from generation to generation, leading to the present situation.

Yuder listened attentively to Kishiar, who was speaking casually about things he hadn't known before.

"The gloves aren't the only issue. It's the same from head to toe. Once you attach the tag of 'tradition,' no matter what problems arise, they become unchangeable, leading to no change or progress. It's a sickness of the Empire."

"Is it possible to change it now?"

At Yuder's cautious question, Kishiar softly lit up his eyes and smiled.

"Of course, it will be changed. In fact, His Majesty the Emperor had always wished to change this aspect, but it was impossible this time. However, next time…"

The rest of the sentence, omitted with a smile, was not heard but could be guessed. Yuder recalled the face of Emperor Keilusa, who had cleverly and indirectly shown support every time Kishiar and the Cavalry were about to stir something up.

The scholarly Emperor, who had been working alone in a small palace located in the remotest corner, leaving many other palaces empty, held such thoughts. It was surprisingly astonishing.

'I died too early in my previous life, so I knew nothing Both brothers had great dreams.'

"That aside."

With a change in his expression, Kishiar, shifting his gaze, opened his mouth while glancing at the formal attire Yuder was wearing. A mischievous mood rose above his red eyes.

"As expected, it suits you well."

“What are you talking about?”

“Your formal attire. It’s a good example that it can look more valuable than anything else if the hanger is good, even if it’s made without excessive luxury.”

Yuder looked down at the formal attire he was wearing. He had never thought about whether the attire he was wearing before he came here was luxurious or not, but standing in front of Kishiar, the difference was clearly visible. The formal attire he was wearing used good-looking fabric and had gold buttons, but no jewels were used, and the shape was much simpler.

‘Looking back, the formal attire of the nobles who attended the parties in my previous life… it seems like there were no clothes without jewels.’

“Did you purposely make it like this?”

“Actually, legally, that’s more correct. The law forbids excessive luxury of those leading the Empire. It’s a mere formality now, though.”

After saying that, Kishiar tilted his head and chuckled.

“…And actually, it also suits my taste.”

“Excuse me?”

“I told you. I have a certain taste in these things. Since the result came out quite to my liking, I expect a new trend in formal attire to spread across the continent after today.”

Kishiar, who nodded his head in satisfaction, came closer, stretched out his hand to the end of the belt around Yuder’s waist.

“You seem to do everything well, but this is a bit clumsy. If you tie it like this, the knot will soon come undone.”

“I’ll tie it again.”

“No need. Watch how I tie it so it won’t come loose.”

The duke was serving as a valet, attending to another man’s clothes. It would have caused a stir if someone had seen, but it was only Kishiar and Yuder here.

Yuder felt slightly dizzy watching Kishiar, who bent his waist in front of him and started to pull and tie the strap. He thought he knew better than anyone that Kishiar was a man whose actions were hard to predict, but watching him tie his waistband in flashy formal attire was a different issue.

Even though he was wearing thick formal attire, the sensation of fingers touching too closely was felt through his waist, and it was difficult to maintain his usual calmness. The scent of the perfume emanating from Kishiar’s golden hair was too strong, and above all…

‘Anyway, this position is…’

“Are you watching? Turn this part around like this and tie the knot, then it won’t come loose.”

“I get it. I’ll do it now… Ugh.”

Yuder, who was trying to hastily step back, let out an involuntary choked sound due to the pressure he felt as the knot was tightly pulled.

“Ah, my apologies. Why are you moving about? You should stay still when I’m tying your belt.”

He was the cause of this situation and yet he was making such a remark. Unable to contain his irritation, Yuder finally retorted.

“Commander, I am not a child.”

“Of course you’re not. You think I don’t know your age?”

“I mean, I am capable of tying my own belt.”

“It’s not just about tying it, is it? There, all done.”

Kishiar, who stepped back after tying the last knot, stroked his chin with a satisfied look, as if admiring his work.

“As expected. The previous one was tied too loosely, it lacked the proper tension.”

To Yuder, it felt no different, yet Kishiar kept lavishing praise on his own work, as if he had made a significant change. Realizing that any further protest would probably fall on deaf ears, Yuder decided to give up quickly.

“Now, before we leave, about the security of the building…”

“Ah, before that, just one more thing. I remembered something I had forgotten, so wait.”

Upon hearing this, Kishiar suddenly seemed to remember something and vanished down the hallway towards the bedrooms. Yuder was left standing blankly where Kishiar had disappeared. A moment later, Kishiar returned and handed Yuder a pair of white gloves that were long enough to cover up to his elbows.

“I got these a while ago. They were enchanted for convenience. Here, take them.”

“This is…”

Yuder involuntarily hardened his expression.

He had seen those gloves before. They were one of the gloves that Kishiar, in his past life, often wore especially when he was about to retire from his position as Commander. The memory of him wearing very similar long white gloves on the day he died suddenly made Yuder feel cold.

“I’m fine. The ones I’m wearing now are enough.”

“They match your current formal wear better than black ones. Besides, I originally got them for you.”

Despite the incredibly soft voice, it felt like a thorn pricking his heart. Why was that? He had experienced a similar feeling before, but now the pain was more intense than ever.

In his past life, Yudrain Aile, following the orders of the Katchian Emperor, assassinated Kishiar La Orr without any remorse.

However, since his return, every time he confronted this sensation, he had this strange feeling as if something he never knew existed within him was being violently beaten. To avert his gaze from this unbearable feeling, Yuder lowered his eyes to the ground. As he slowly regained control of his breathing, his fingers cramped up from his tightly clenched fist.

“Of course, it shouldn’t happen like last time when the spots spread a lot, but if such a thing happens, these will help to conceal it or prevent it from spreading. They’re made from threads and fabric drawn from a sacred tree grown with blessings.”

Kishiar, who was explaining, paused as if he sensed something was off.

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Chapter 147

“…Does it not suit your liking?”

Yuder hesitated, barely managing to raise his head again. He couldn’t let Kishiar notice his unease.

“It’s… too generous.”

“It’s not too much. After everything you’ve done, you’re more than deserving of such an honor at the end of the festival. Or would you like to swap it with mine?”

“Weren’t you the one who said yours was more expensive? That’s absolutely out of the question.”

Kishiar had started to raise his hand to remove his glove, but Yuder quickly stopped him.

“I understand. Since the Commander has given it to me, I will gratefully accept.”

Yuder removed his black glove and put on the white one in front of him. He rolled up the sleeves of his ceremonial dress to his elbows and finished putting on the gloves. A complex wave of emotions briefly surged in his chest, but soon settled.

“You seem to be fully prepared.”

At that moment, Nathan Zuckerman entered the commander’s office, speaking as he did. Contrary to his usual attire, he wore an armor embossed with the emblem of the Peletta Knights. The southern man who approached without even a blink at Kishiar’s splendor paused and blinked when he saw Yuder standing beside him.

“The ceremonial attire suits you well, Mr. Aile.”

“Thank you for your compliment, Mr. Zuckerman.”

“Please take it cheerfully. Nathan doesn’t give such compliments to just anyone.”

In response to Kishiar’s confident smile, Yuder said nothing. Nathan Zuckerman also paid no attention to his lord’s jest, moving swiftly onto his business.

“I’ve come to report that all 30 Peletta Knights summoned by the Duke have arrived and are currently in position. From the moment you leave to the moment you return, they will be guarding this entire building and various points within the Imperial Knights grounds.”

“Good. What about Thais Yulman?”

Kishiar nodded and asked about the mage Thais Yulman. Receiving a report from Yuder and a bundle of papers sent by Thais, he had granted permission for the stubborn old mage to stay here as he wished. This was shocking news for his apprentice Alik Pelgin, who was dragged into the party without his Master, but no one was there to comfort him.

“He was confirmed to be alone in the basement when I last checked. He said he didn’t want anyone else entering the basement, so we have stationed a single Knight near the entrance.”

“I heard his apprentice was wandering around yesterday. What was the reason for that?”

“He said we would know when the time came… I suspect he was setting traps or defensive circles to protect this building.”

“It’s probably both.”

Yuder finally found his chance to speak up. In fact, what he had intended to say to Kishiar was about that very matter, but he had not had the chance to say it yet.

“I met Alik yesterday and he told me that Thais Yulman had ordered him to do various things to protect the basement and the building.”

“He must have really hated the idea of going to the party. It’s fortunate we’ve got extra protection thanks to him.”

After a short nod and expressing his evaluation, Kishiar looked back at Yuder and Nathan.

“I am likely to stay at the imperial palace today. Last night, His Majesty sent me a letter suggesting a spontaneous family meal. I believe he couldn’t refuse Her Majesty’s request.”

“In that case, what should we do with the Cavalry?”

“You and a few others will stay by my side, while the rest shall return once the party is over. Until then, Nathan, you are to guard this place.”

“I will fulfill the responsibility you’ve entrusted to me.”

Observing Nathan, who held the hilt of his sword lightly and bowed his head, a sharp, well-honed smile appeared in Kishiar’s eyes.

“Let’s make today the best day for us all, and for the Cavalry. Now, shall we get going?”

Kishiar began to walk, leading the way with his cloak billowing. Nathan and Yuder followed, their shoulders aligned. Every time they descended the stairs, the assembled Cavalry members and the

Knights of Peletta, their eyes wide with admiration, offered enthusiastic greetings.

“Greetings, Commander!”

“We’re glad to see you in good health after so long, my lord.”

“I’m happy to see you too, Ticker. I look forward to your work today.”

“Of course, my lord!”

Kishiar continued his descent, raising his hand in return to those greeting him or occasionally tossing a light-hearted remark. As they reached the ground floor, they saw a line of carriages in front of the Cavalry barracks. The members gazed in awe at the spectacle of countless carriages gathered together.

“It’s incredible. All these carriages are for us…”

“Commander! You’re here.”

The Deputy Commanders, who had been loading the members and checking their numbers, noticed Kishiar’s arrival and hurried over.

Looking at Steiber, who pushed his hair back, softening his usual stern demeanor, Ever, who twisted her long hair up, and Kanna, who pinned her short hair behind her ears, Yuder understood Kishiar’s comment about making formal wear beautiful without jewels.

They too could not hide their surprise at seeing Kishiar’s formal attire, but their eyes widened even more upon seeing Yuder beside him.

“Wow, Commander. You look truly… radiant in formal wear.”

“Haha, Steiber. Your compliment is quite something. Thank you.”

“Yuder, your outfit is a different color from ours. It suits you!”

Kanna offered a small voice of greeting from behind Steiber.

“You too.”

Although it was a curt reply, Kanna didn’t seem to mind. She winked playfully and gave a quick thumbs-up. Yuder offered a faint smile in response.

“So, how many have boarded so far?”

Steiber stepped forward to answer Kishiar’s question, looking around before speaking.

“Currently… well, about half have boarded. The carriage for you, Commander, is at the very front. Please feel free to board first.”

“You’ve worked hard.”

“This is nothing compared to collaborating on event security. It’s not tough at all.”

Ever saluted with a confident smile.

Yuder followed Kishiar to the front of the carriage line. Standing before the beautiful carriage, marked with the imperial crest and decorated with the emblem of the Duke of Peletta, was the coachman, along with Alik Pelgin.

“Good day, Your Grace. I’m grateful for the privilege of accompanying you to the palace.”

It was an impeccable greeting, yet Yuder saw an unmistakable gloom and deep fatigue veiled over the face of the young mage. Alone without Thais Yulman, the thought of accompanying Kishiar, a notoriously challenging figure, seemed quite despairing.

“No worries. It’s only natural for me, as the Commander, to accompany our Cavalrys honored guest. I’d appreciate hearing a lot about your research during the journey.”

“Y-yes…”

The coachman, standing beside the sighing Alik Pelgin, bowed politely and opened the door. Before Kishiar boarded the carriage, Nathan Zuckerman saluted and approached, lowering his voice.

“Your schedule has suddenly changed, please take extra care of yourself.”

“There’s no need to be overly cautious about a family meal and a night.”

“I recall you mentioning not much time was left for the… cycle…”

“Right.”

Kishiar replied briefly, patting the loyal adjutant’s shoulder with a smile.

“Even if something goes wrong, the one who gets hurt now won’t be me. So put aside your excessive worries, Nathan.”

Nathan Zuckerman retreated with a small sigh. After everyone boarded, the carriage door was closed. Alik Pelgin bowed his head, looking like he would rather be in a lavatory. His desire for Kishiar not to speak to him was almost visible, but that sort of luck did not happen.

“We will depart shortly.”

Soon after all the members had boarded the carriages, the coachman opened a small window and announced they were about

to depart. The carriages started moving one by one, the sound of hooves and the vibration underneath could be felt.

“Well, we still have quite a bit of time before we arrive, let’s share some stories.”

Sitting next to Yuder, Kishiar turned to Alik with a smile.

“I’ve been so busy that I couldn’t personally visit the basement, and I’m very curious. I’d love to hear a lot about the Pearl Tower I’ve only heard stories of.”

“A-ah, yes.”

“Why are you sweating so much? If you need a handkerchief, let me know.”

“No, I have one, thank you…”

Alik, who had been moving around within the Cavalry acting as the eyes and ears of his Master, now saw a different side of Kishiar La Orr. He was not the good-for-nothing Duke he was often called.

Like Thais Yulman had said, he was like a cunning beast, lying low, waiting for the right opportunity, hiding his claws. Being able to observe such a terrifying entity up close was considered a fascinating and wonderful opportunity by his Master, but the faint-hearted Alik did not wish to be too close to such a fearful entity.

Look at him now. He claimed he wanted to discuss research and the Pearl Tower, but was that all?

‘Knowing that, you send me here alone… Master, this is too much!’

But what could he do? Now that things had come to this, all that was left was to comply as meekly as possible. Alik, hoping that

Yuder Aile, sitting next to Duke Peletta, would serve as his backup, began to hesitantly engage in conversation with Kishiar.

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Chapter 148

As the Cavalry carriages sped towards the imperial palace in a long line, another carriage escaped from the quiet, closed-off grounds of the Apeto dukedom.

“Second Prince, are you really thinking of leaving like this? If the Duke finds out about this…”

“Silence. Since when have you been so bold as to challenge my words? You too believe I’m forever estranged from my heirship, don’t you? Do you wish to die here?”

The occupants of the carriage were the Second Prince, Lenore Shand Apeto, and his servant. Lenore, after the unsavory incident a few days ago, was confined under house arrest by order of the Duke of Apeto. However, his servants dared not stop him as he decided to leave the mansion. The memories of his relentless violence still cast a shadow over the entire mansion.

The servant, forced to accompany him, was just as afraid of Lenore. He had mustered enough courage to speak, fearful of the backlash from the Duke of Apeto who would learn later of Lenore’s disobedience. But his determination was swiftly extinguished in the face of Lenore’s anger.

“M-, My Lord, how could I dare think such a disgraceful thought? This foolish man misspoke out of concern for you!”

The servant hurriedly prostrated himself on the carriage floor and apologized, but Lenore, unable to suppress his anger, kicked him hard.

“Ugh!”

“Fool. I should have brought someone else! I picked just anyone because I was short on time, and you dare to insult me?”

“Pl-, please spare me, my Lord. I’m sorry… mercy…”

Lenore finally managed to quell his anger a little, kicking the servant until the toe of his boot was stained red.

“Know that my not killing you here is mercy. You got filthy blood on it; clean it at once.”

“Y-, yes, thank you…”

The servant stifled his whimpering and bowed his head. As he began to clean Lenore’s boot, blood seeping from his forehead, he thought about lashing out once more as the man’s feeble movement displeased him. But if he did, and the servant couldn’t stand, he wouldn’t be able to enter the imperial palace, so Lenore held himself back. Crossing his arms, he closed his eyes and focused on calming his rage.

‘The letter. Think about the letter. I’m heading towards a second chance. I can’t ruin this from the get-go by losing my temper.’

The thought was effective. Lenore traced the outline of a small letter hidden in the pocket of his formal attire with his hand tucked inside his crossed arms. That letter was the reason why Lenore abruptly broke the Duke of Apeto’s command and fled from the mansion.

Two days ago, Lenore received a small note while confined to his room. Hidden skillfully within a tray of snacks brought by a maid, the note bore a name that he never would have imagined.

‘The Crown Prince Katchian La Orr… wants me?’

The handwriting on the note was elegant, and the message, succinct. It said that he could offer Lenore a second chance.

After hearing the news that Aishes Shand Apeto sent a letter to the Cavalry, I decided to reach out to you immediately. That's all there is to it. The choice is yours. If you feel inclined to send a response, do so in the same manner.

Aishes, who must be overjoyed by now, having heard that Lenore, who has fallen out of favor with the Duke of Apeto, had sent a letter to the Cavalry. The meaning was clear. Aishes had thrown a gambit to topple Lenore without giving him even a single chance to climb back up.

Lenore shivered at the fact that he was unaware of this, and then paced nervously around the room. In the past, he had controlled a significant number of Apeto family's secret informants at his will, but now he could only glean a little of the outside world's affairs from the Crown Prince's letters.

The realization that all the power he thought he possessed actually belonged to the Duke of Apeto sent him into a state of fear and confusion for the first time in her life.

'Is father really intending to discard me as I am? Me, his only intact child?'

He wanted to believe it wasn't so, but the letter had shaken her. Being the child most like the Duke of Apeto in temperament, he knew his ruthlessness better than anyone. He was not the type to forgive those who had smeared his face without gaining anything in return.

'Yes, it might be better to find a third way rather than being miserably driven away while obeying a father who has no intention of trusting me to the end.'

The vast lineage of Apeto was like a massive iron fortress. Regardless of who took over the fortress, and how many died in the process, the family never collapsed and was not likely to in the future.

After pondering how many times parents and children had killed and been killed over power in the long history of the dukedom, Lenore made his decision. He calmly sat down and wrote his reply on the back of the Crown Prince's letter.

'The real master behind this letter is probably Duke Diarca. It would be quite nauseating if this matter puts me at a disadvantage with Diarca… but as long as I can become the Duke of Apeto, that's all that matters. I can cover it all.'

The subtle sense of superiority the Diarca duchy projected to other families after placing the Prince of Katchian on the throne, the future de facto imperial family, had stirred considerable resentment. Lenore was one of them.

However, her survival was now the priority.

The second letter from the Crown Prince of Katchian arrived the very next morning. Tucked inside a tray of food as before, the letter accepted Lenore's cooperation gladly and contained a postscript.

Return the letter, and hand over your next reply directly, so I can believe in you as clearly as the rising sun.

Damn Diarca bastards. Cursing the Duke of Diarca, who would be laughing behind the Crown Prince's letter, Lenore crumpled the note. The phrase asking for faith as clear as the rising sun was from a famous play, a line used metaphorically to demand faith even at the cost of a great sacrifice.

There was only one way for Lenore to hand over his response directly to the Crown Prince. He had to attend the party on the last

day of the harvest festival, which he would have had to attend under normal circumstances.

When I break my seclusion and go there, I won't be able to return to my past life. He knows this, hence his request.

Once embarked on a path of no return, there was no pulling back midway. If he didn't accept this proposition, the Crown Prince and the Diarca family would undoubtedly seek out someone else, someone they deemed predictable, to make the same offer.

Perhaps… someone like Revlin. That fool, so blinded by the honey in front of him, would likely not comprehend the gravity of such a proposal!

Remembering the day Beltrail had gone mad, and Revlin, his younger brother, had left their home, following Duke Peletta with a gleeful expression while he, Lenore, fell from grace. His teeth ground together at the recollection. Lenore surmised his judgment to be correct, his anger boiling over as he hastily wrote his response.

With the break of dawn, he slipped out of his mansion and was on his way.

"We'll be arriving soon. You can see the checkpoint, prepare yourself, my Lord."

Lenore opened his eyes at the cautious words of the coachman. The stiffened servant caught the harsh gaze of his master, gulped in surprise, but didnt dare meet his eyes.

Lenore extracted two sealed letters from his pocket. One was the formal reply to the Crown Prince, but the other wasn't. The latter was the original of the second letter he had received from the Crown Prince.

As desperate as I am, driven into a corner, I can’t trust them completely.

In case the Crown Prince and Duke Diarca didn’t keep their promise, Lenore kept the original letter and returned a replica hidden in the tray. He doubted they would meticulously examine the returned letter, and even if they did discover the deception, he could simply explain it away after the meeting with the Crown Prince.

He swiftly noted down the series of events that had befallen him on the back of the Crown Prince’s original letter and signed it. If his meeting with the Crown Prince resulted in a favorable outcome, this second letter would never see the light of day.

However, if the opposite were to occur…

“You. Hold on to this while I am in the palace.”

“Eh? Yes! Understood.”

After thoughtful consideration, Lenore handed the second letter to the servant. The servant, with due respect, received it without daring to glimpse at it.

“Keep it with you while waiting with the other servants. If I return, hand it back to me. If I send word that I can’t collect it personally… Hmm. Right. Deliver that letter to Revlin.”

Mentioning Revlin was a purely impulsive decision. Even though they had a strained relationship at the moment, the most naive and least suspicious person in the Apeto family was undoubtedly Revlin.

“The… The Revlin who is said to have joined the Cavalry? Is that alright?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself.”

The servant quickly bowed his head and apologized in response to Lenore's stern warning.

'If that idiot doesn't lose the letter, it'll be a miracle. Tsk.'

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Chapter 149

A moment later, the carriage halted. The front of Deluma Palace, the largest building inside the city's second wall, was a constant flow of arriving and departing carriages, almost forming a mountain. The special award ceremony party, held to appreciate all those who had worked throughout the year, always had a participation of at least 500 people. But this year, the entire Cavalry was invited, making the crowd even more overwhelming.

Lenore, intending to stay inconspicuous, donned a traditional formal attire, keeping his head low as he swiftly entered the palace. With so many people around, no one paid much attention to those brushing past them. He was relieved.

As he approached one of the ten servants frantically checking the attendees, gave his name, and presented his identification badge, the man stiffened, lifted his head, and stared at Lenore. After a pause, he handed back the badge and politely gestured towards the interior with a bow.

"Please, enter."

The party at Deluma Palace had areas restricted to entry based on the attendee's status and importance. Those of relatively lower status stayed on the first floor, but the 'truly' important individuals were granted the right to directly enter the second floor. The powerful nobles, renowned knights, mages, and the envoys from foreign countries visiting the empire to celebrate this harvest festival were the protagonists here.

Lenore headed straight for the second floor. There were many people, but the few chairs placed at the most visible part of the vast hall were all empty. These were reserved for the Emperor, the

Empress, the Crown Prince, and the Duke of Peletta, among other imperial family members.

However, the Emperor had been absent from these parties for a few years now, citing poor health and delegating his duties to the Empress, so those in attendance naturally assumed the same for this year.

‘It seems the Crown Prince has not arrived yet.’

He covertly scanned the attendees. Despite the significant incident at Apeto House, the second floor of Deluma Hall was calm as if nothing had happened. With the Cavalry yet to arrive, the largest crowd had gathered around the most famous foreign dignitary, the second prince of the Kingdom of Nellarn.

Lenore felt a strange anger and bitterness as he watched the chattering attendees exchange elegant smiles. Clenching his fists did not make these feelings disappear.

“No way, it really is Young Master Lenore.”

Then, someone recognized Lenore and started a conversation. Startled, Lenore turned to find a few young nobles with familiar faces, and his brow furrowed. Only then did the gazes from all around concentrate on him.

“How did you come? I heard that Apeto House is not attending this time. Has the Duke changed his mind?”

“Well, you could say that.”

Despite lying as easily as eating, his mouth went dry, perhaps due to the imminent moment that would change the direction of his life.

“I knew it. I believed that Apeto wouldn’t even flinch at a trial that Duke Peletta is preparing. Now that you’ve arrived, I can proudly say that I was right.”

Lenore’s heart pounded at the words of the grinning noble.

Before receiving the letter from the Crown Prince, he had thought the same. He believed that no matter how much the Cavalry tried to shake Apeto, it would be useless. That all blame lay with the insane Beltrail, and once his father calmed his anger, he could be freed.

However, Crown Prince Katchian had poured cold water on his hopes and informed him of the harsh reality. If Aishes had deliberately passed information related to Lenore’s transgression to the Cavalry, he, who was out of favor and had lost his relatives, would be unable to respond.

Ignoring the chatter and interest-filled gazes of the nobles, Lenore felt that his decision to accept the meeting with Crown Prince Katchian was indeed the best choice.

“Yes. For the future, I’ll have to endure situations like this.”

“Why are you all swarming and blocking the entrance so distastefully? Please step aside.”

Then, someone who had just entered directed a sharp complaint at the nobles surrounding Lenore. They turned their heads in anger at the direct insult to their dignity, but upon seeing his face, they quickly dispersed. Lenore, watching the person coming through the dispersing crowd, quickly understood why they had scattered.

“Kiolle da Diarca.”

Not many people liked him, notorious for his recklessness. However, the family name behind Kiolle was not one to be disregarded.

Lenore braced himself, wondering what Kiolle might say to him, but to his surprise, Kiolle only glanced at him once and walked past. It was as if he hadn't even noticed Lenore.

"That arrogant kid."

Lenore ground his teeth, glaring at Kiolle.

"He ignores me like that because he knows why I'm here today. Sure, today he may feel as if the Duke of Diarca's influence is his, but it won't be like that in the future."

"The Cavalry has all arrived, they say. They'll be coming up soon."

"Let's see how high and mighty the Duke of Peletta appears."

A short while later, the area became noisy again. Turning his head, Lenore blinked in surprise as he felt an unfamiliar wind blow from the large golden entrance door.

The previously languid air inside the hall changed in an instant with the wind. As if by agreement, everyone turned their eyes in the same direction. The tall man who entered, surrounded by a cold wind that captivated everyone, had such handsome features that one wouldn't forget them after seeing them just once.

"It's the Duke of Peletta."

"Duke Kishiar La Orr of Peletta."

At the appearance of Duke Kishiar La Orr of Peletta, the people stirred like a wave. Some felt as though the chandelier light, unnoticed until a moment ago, was shining solely on him. Whether seeing Kisiar in this setting for the first time, or not, there was no doubt that they were overwhelmed by him for that brief moment.

But what surprised the people didn’t stop there. As those following Kisiar in a four-row line entered in turn, the atmosphere of the hall changed once more.

“So, they are the Cavalry. They seem powerful.”

“I heard most of them are commoners, but they don’t seem any different from any traditional knight orders!”

Some murmured in admiration at the dignity and decorum of the Cavalry.

“Is it thanks to them that there were no major accidents throughout the festival?”

“When we go back to our country, I suggest we gather people like them and entrust them with some work.”

Some were recounting tales of the knightly Cavalry members that had made a name for themselves throughout the festival and the future that was to be reshaped by their actions. The sight of every person gathered as if their existence was for the sake of the Cavalry and the Duke of Peletta left Lenore feeling dizzy.

‘Why isn’t anyone talking about what they’ve done to me, to Apeto?’

Lenore couldn’t shake the nearly terrifying image of Kishiar playing loosely with his words while hiding Revlin behind him, taking on both the Duke of Apeto and Lenore himself. Just the sight of Duke Peletta, resplendent in his formal attire, giggling with inexplicable joy made him nauseous. It wasn’t a metaphor, he truly felt ill.

‘Damn it. Why hasn’t the Crown Prince of Katchian arrived yet? Does he remember our promise?’

As he saw the Cavalry members, clad in white formal attire, dispersing throughout the party hall, Lenore slowly began to step back. Among them, there were definitely members who had come to the house of Apeto with Kishiar and seen his face, and he didn't want to bump into them.

Rubbing his face nervously, he headed towards a corner of the hall. With his heart pounding uncomfortably fast, he thought it might be better to step into the rest area for a while.

As Lenore, catching his breath from the brisk walk, bumped into someone again.

"Oops."

If it had been a guest he knew, he would have apologized, but the person was a noblewoman he was meeting for the first time. He tried to ignore her and continue walking, but another person who helped the stumbling woman, who was about to fall after he stepped on her hem, grabbed his hand, preventing him from doing so.

"Excuse me, shouldn't you apologize first?"

When Lenore turned his gaze, he was choked to realize that the rude and arrogant man was a member of the Cavalry he remembered.

'This guy is definitely…'

With hair and eyes that seemed to hold a sinister darkness, and a spooky face devoid of any humane emotions, there was no doubt.

'Isn't he the one who dragged the unconscious Beltrail like a sack and dumped him in front of us that day!'

"Let, let go."

Lenore, momentarily paralyzed in his senses, shook his arm furiously, forgetting even his dignity, to shake off the man's hand. He then turned and started to walk briskly in the opposite direction, only to halt as he was about to bump into someone else. This time, his would-be collision was with a waiter carrying several golden goblets on a tray. Feeling that he had finally found someone he could rightfully be angry with, Lenore raised his voice, all the pent-up anger pouring out.

"You idiot. Where are your eyes?"

"I apologize. If you're feeling unwell, please let me know. Immediate measures will be…"

"For… forget it!"

As he opened his mouth to speak, his throat was parched and his voice cracked. Lenore, realizing the intense thirst within him, reached out roughly for a goblet the waiter was carrying while panting for breath.

"Give me a drink."

"Please wait a moment. That drink is…"

"Shut up. Can't you just get another drink!"

Before the waiter could object, he gulped down the drink hastily, feeling the burning sensation as it traveled down his throat. Lenore, patting his momentarily refreshed throat, sighed quietly.

'Phew.'

However, the relief was short-lived. The next moment, he experienced a pain so great in his stomach that it couldn't be compared to before, shooting straight up to his throat.

“Ku…ack?”

Swallowing his breath at the same time as the goblet fell and shattered on the floor, Lenore fell to the ground, clutching his throat.

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Chapter 150

“Ah! Ah! Ah!”

He screamed in a kind of agony he had never experienced in his life, but no sound came out. His stomach, throat, and head all felt as if they were being consumed by fire. His vision was shrouded in darkness. No sounds reached him. He scratched at the ground and writhed, but the horrific pain did not subside in the slightest.

“Help…!”

His desperately outstretched hand grabbed onto someone’s hem. However, before he could finish his plea for help, that person harshly pulled away.

How dare they! Even in his agony, Lenore felt a sense of disgrace and shame, his hand grasping at the air.

‘Someone, is there no one? Call my servant. No. Call the priest, the priest. Anyone will do, quickly save me…!’

Unfortunately, his thoughts never came to completion. He let out his dying breath, as black blood gushed from his eyes, nose, and mouth.

“Aaargh!”

A sharp scream echoed throughout the entire second floor of Deluma Palace, which had been peaceful. Numerous gazes were drawn to one spot.

“What on earth is happening?”

“Lord Lenore of the Apeto family has collapsed! It’s the second son of the Apeto!”

“Oh dear God, is he dead?”

A few delicate nobles fainted at the sight of the black blood spreading across the beautifully tiled floor and were carried out to the lounge. Those who did not want to be involved in the incident hurriedly exited the scene. Among them were many young and noble aristocrats who represented the name of their family.

Nevertheless, many people, unable to curb their curiosity, gathered around Lenore’s corpse. The servants struggled to push the people back, but to no avail.

Just then, a man pushed his way through the crowd. It was Duke Kishiar of Peletta.

“What is happening?”

Only when he appeared did the crowd finally calm down and make way.

“Your Highness, Lord Lenore Apeto collapsed, vomited blood, and has passed away.”

One of the three servants who had been closely examining the situation bowed and informed Kishiar. With an impassive face, Kishiar approached and briefly looked at Lenore, who lay sprawled out and bloodied. He stopped in front of a partially shattered wine glass that lay amidst the carnage. His gaze slowly fell upon the liquid that had spilled from the glass.

“Is it poison?”

“We don’t know. But it is certain that he collapsed right after taking a sip.”

“Lenore Apeto shouldn’t have been able to attend here today. What happened?”

“We are still confirming that, but it appears that the Lord came from the Duke’s house alone.”

If he came alone, the chances were high that he had defied the Apeto Duke’s orders. It was an unusual occurrence.

“Very well. Then, who gave him this glass?”

“That person is here.”

As soon as Lenore had collapsed, a bewildered servant was apprehended by other servants and brought to Kishiar, forced to kneel. His expression was filled with undeniable confusion and fear.

“Your, Your Highness. I didn’t do anything. Really.”

“Explain what happened first. Why did the son of Apeto suddenly drink your wine and die?”

“I was merely following orders to deliver the glasses of alcohol. On my way, that person almost ran into me and I expressed concern that he might have been hurt… but he dismissed the need for help, took a glass of alcohol, and drank it. And then this happened…”

The server cast a terrified glance toward Lenore’s body and bowed his head.

“I had no idea who this person was. I swear, I did not.”

“…”

Listening to the server’s words, Kishiar’s expression remained unchanged and unreadable. He looked back and forth between Lenore and the server with eyes lost in thought. After a moment, he finally spoke.

“So, where are the other glasses you were supposed to deliver?”

The other glasses the server was carrying were placed on a nearby table. Kishiar had them brought to him, then personally took a spoon to stir one of the drinks. The silver spoon, engraved with a common charm for detecting several types of poison, turned black in an instant, causing terrified gasps to ripple through those nearby.

“Really, it’s poison!”

“An assassin?”

Amidst the clamor, Kishiar turned to the ashen-faced server.

“Tell me, who gave you that glass, and where were you taking it?”

“I’ve been thinking since it happened. But I’ve been serving so many trays that I can’t recall who gave it to me… And where I was supposed to deliver that glass…”

The server dropped to his knees, unable to utter the words himself. Kishiar waited patiently until he managed to respond in a barely audible voice.

“It… it was for the Crown Prince’s table.”

God, the Crown Prince. Who could have… The murmur of anxiety swelled when a voice from the entrance called out.

“The Empress and the Crown Prince have arrived.”

Upon seeing the two individuals who had arrived at such a delicate moment, some in the crowd expressed disappointment or relief that Emperor Keilusa had yet again failed to attend this year. However, most eyes were instinctively drawn toward Crown Prince Katchian.

The young Crown Prince, who would have received the poisoned glass had he arrived just a bit sooner, looked as calm as usual. Upon entering, the Empress received an account of the incident from the server, her face turning deathly pale but managing not to faint. She waved off everyone trying to greet her and immediately addressed Kishiar.

“Is it true what I’ve heard? An assassination attempt?”

“So far, all we know is that someone used the server to cleverly attempt to place three poisoned glasses on His Highness the Crown Prince’s table.”

“So you’re saying we still don’t know who that person is, Duke Peletta?”

As soon as Kishiar finished, it was the Crown Prince who threw back the pointed question. Before anyone could stop him, he walked straight over to Kishiar and looked around. His gaze settled on Lenore’s body. For a moment, a cruel smile flickered in his eyes, but it disappeared as quickly as it appeared, unnoticed by anyone.

“…So it seems. They cannot recall.”

“Then I suppose we ought to jog their memory, but wouldn’t our priority here be to first have the knights detain the server and promptly rescue that poor mans body, returning it to his family? A man has died, can we just let him lay there as if he’s some spectacle? I believe we won’t be late even if we pursue the culprit after managing the immediate situation.”

Despite knowing that there was a high probability that it was an assassination attempt targeting him, the young Crown Prince remained calm. His sage response, despite his tender years, heightened the tension in the room.

“I had some doubts because he is an adoptive child who doesn’t properly continue the imperial lineage… But, he is truly impressive. Such composure at that age.”

“He’s indeed different from those without any substance.”

The audacious foreign envoy, who mumbled a blunt metaphor, became startled by the cold stares of the Cavalry members surrounding him from all sides and hastily closed his mouth, disappearing. However, no matter how many Cavalry members were present, the atmosphere had long since shifted.

Many people felt embarrassed, unable to understand why they were so overwhelmed by simply looking at Kishiar’s outward appearance as if they’d woken up from a dream. Kishiar, despite his strikingly beautiful appearance akin to a divine apparition, was a shabby noble of low rank. It was inexplicable why they momentarily forgot that fact.

Crown Prince Katchian, straightening his shoulders, stepped forward and ordered his servants to take care of Lenore’s body and to detain the arrested servant. As the Crown Prince’s accompanying servants began to act efficiently to follow the orders, the confusion among the people gradually subsided. Taking this opportunity, the empress, having regained her composure, issued orders in place of the emperor as the ruler of the empire present.

“Given the unfortunate events that have transpired, it seems difficult to continue with today’s schedule here. The award ceremony will be held again at a later date. Everyone may return for now. If attendees wish, they may rest a bit longer on the first floor…”

“This can’t be… Is everything abruptly ending like this?”

“What should we do? Should we go down to the first floor?”

“Shouldn’t we?”

Yuder, who had been observing the situation from a bit of a distance, involuntarily turned his head at the voice of a Cavalry member nearby. The Calvary members who were quite cheerful when they arrived here now wore dark expressions.

He glanced at the Cavalry members' faces, then turned his body, moving against the crowd that began to slowly head toward the first floor. At the end, he saw Kishiar standing alone, watching the servants carrying away the hastily managed body of Lenore. Despite being adorned with sparkling jewels and beautiful formal attire, his figure seemed unbearably lonely.

"Commander."

"Hmm? You haven't gone down to the first floor and came here instead?"

Kishiar's voice, standing alone like a large tree, was bright and cheerful enough to erase all of the sentimental feelings Yuder had just experienced. Yuder felt a sinking feeling as he looked at his smiling face.

"Instead, why are you, Commander, still here without going down? Are you okay?"

"Of course, I'm okay. I'm neither hurt nor dead."

"Then why…"

"It just feels strange, that's all."

Kishiar lowered his voice, mumbling with a smile.

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Chapter 151

“Don’t you think everything happened too conveniently? The arrival and demise of Lenore Shand Apeto,”

“Are those the only events you think occurred at the right time? Such thoughts can be well reflected upon in the afterlife.”

At Yuder’s subtly bristling response, Kishiar turned his head. A different emotion briefly flickered across his red eyes.

“I see. Were you worried by any chance?”

“How could I dare to entertain such thoughts?”

“I didn’t mean to worry you. I was merely lost in thought for a moment. Now, let’s proceed downwards.”

Laughing, Kishiar reached out and lightly tapped Yuder’s shoulder.

Yuder, following the gracefully twirling back of Kishiar’s formal wear, quickened his steps. He intended to follow obediently, but thinking of the guests who had turned their backs on Kishiar, a surge of cold emotion welled up in his heart once again.

Kishiar had proven his abilities enough. After Lenore’s death, his demeanor was entirely befitting of the highest royal present. It would have been much more logical to leave everything in place, assess the situation, and then make a judgment if an incident occurred.

Yet, at the seemingly fine words of Prince Katchian, everyone easily turned a blind eye to Kishiar. The spectacle of people who were chatting and laughing just moments before, turning their bodies in embarrassment so swiftly was beyond laughable. He may have

had a reputation as an inept, pleasure-loving fop, but the rapid shift in attitude was too much to even find amusing.

‘Well, they were always like that.’

Yuder saw many familiar faces from his past life in the crowd at today’s party. Although they now bore younger and more refined faces, their gazes were exactly the same as they had been. The majority were self-serving individuals.

If he had not reversed time, Yuder Aile would have thought of the high and mighty’s affairs as none of his concern, regardless of the absurd rumors and perceptions surrounding Kishiar. As long as Kishiar himself was not like that, he wouldn’t have cared.

But now he knew. If Kishiar were to suddenly die one day, none of these nobles would mourn or remember him. All the things Kishiar had tried to change alone would be easily forgotten and ignored. Just like now.

He had returned through eleven years of time and thought he had changed quite a lot, but it was still not enough. Had he made some wrong choices? Should he have done more? A chilly wind blew through his troubled heart.

“I’m fine.”

At that moment, as if reading his thoughts, Kishiar spoke, and the icy storm rising within Yuder suddenly lost its strength and crumbled. Turning his head, he saw Kishiar slowly continuing his speech as he descended the stairs with an unflustered stride.

“Being ignored isn’t always a bad thing. The moment when no one is watching can be the best time to observe everyone else. Plus… I have no intention of obediently stepping down.”

“…”

Yuder tried to open his mouth to say something, but ended up remaining silent. How could he speak so nonchalantly? Questions swirled in his mind.

Where had that seemingly infinite steadfastness in the man's heart come from?

Had he never once wished to reveal all his strength and make everyone kneel before him?

Had he ever felt anger or disappointment toward those who blocked his path?

Was the Kishiar of his past life, now almost completely faded from his memory due to the passage of time, such a person?

As these thoughts consumed him, a sudden surge of sensation woke his mind. Yuder realized he had been lost in thought without realizing it, and blinked. There was a rush of heat within his eyelids.

Despite deciding not to make unnecessary assumptions and to focus on the present, it was difficult to control.

But one thing was certain. Even if all the plans for the day had been upended, there wasn't a single scratch on Kishiar's solid wall. If he was untroubled, Yuder could not be anxious.

'My choice was right. Nothing has gone wrong yet.'

Walking a step behind Kishiar, Yuder suddenly remembered the moment he realized that he had somehow turned back time. At that time, many crossroads lay before him. But the thought suddenly came to him that perhaps he had chosen the Cavalry and Kishiar again to gain this very conviction at this very moment.

If you're not going to back down as it is, what are you planning to do?

Regaining his composure and asking the question, Kishiar responded as if he had been waiting for it.

You probably didnt expect it either, did you? Who might be behind the unnatural death of Apetos son?

Yes.

It was likely Prince Katchian's trick. Perhaps he even borrowed Diarca's hand. Yuder tightened his lips as he recalled the prince, who had always appeared with a seemingly benign and elegant face.

Because his attempt to shake us during the festival failed, he must have invested in today's event. He must have wanted to influence the upcoming trial with today's event, but"

Kishiar, who was speaking, paused and let out an ambiguous smile.

He was too hasty, wasnt he?

At that moment, Yuder also realized what Kishiar was thinking.

That's right. If emotions come before thorough planning, there will certainly be gaps left.

Even if the event is canceled, it's rare for anyone to leave right away. Her Majesty the Empress will also be here for about an hour. I plan to have a conversation with her and the others. Of course, His Highness the Crown Prince will be present as well.

There was not much distance left from the entrance to the first floor hall. Yuder glanced sideways and checked how many people were on guard. It seemed that he could easily escape without much effort, given the absence of a crisis.

I will try to find evidence.

Dont push yourself. If it’s not this time, just aim for the next.

Kishiar said so, but Yuder’s thoughts were slightly different. However, he obediently nodded and answered on the outside.

Yes.

“Take this to Kanna.”

Just before entering the first floor hall, Kishiar handed Yuder a piece of glass he had been secretly holding in his hand.

Its a fragment of the poisoned cup that fell during the clean-up. If she does well, she might be able to read something from it.

I will deliver it.

The bustling hall of the first floor was densely packed with people. Those who had been on the first floor were taken aback by the sudden influx of high-ranking guests from the second floor, and those who had been on the second floor were too busy chattering about the dreadful incident. Yuder briefly watched Kishiar, who was heading towards the highest place reserved for the imperial family, before he turned around.

“Kanna.”

“Yuder. Where have you been?”

“I was accompanying the Commander. But before that, take this.”

Kanna was with the other members of the Cavalry. He discreetly pulled her aside and handed her a piece of glass wrapped in a handkerchief. Her eyes flashed seriously.

“This… could it be a piece of the poisoned glass from earlier?”

“Yes.”

Upon hearing that Kishiar had ordered her to read the shard, Kanna immediately cupped her hands around the fragment, concealing it and closing her eyes. Energy rippled in her trembling fingertips as she concentrated.

“Hmm…”

“Did you find out anything?”

“Yuder, you said the servant who served this earlier claimed he knew nothing, right?”

Kanna, having opened her eyes, asked an unexpected question.

“That’s what he said.”

“The last memory left in the glass seems to be a bit different. That servant directly poisoned the inside.”

“Directly?”

“Yes. And this is even more surprising. It seems that his target wasn’t the Crown Prince from the beginning, but the late Prince Lenore Shand Apeto.”

“The Second Prince of Apeto… How did he know that he would drink from the poisoned glass?”

“I’m not sure about that. But the person who took this glass seemed to be confident that, given the right moment, the prince would definitely pick up this glass and drink from it.”

If the timing was right, definitely.

Yuder’s mind began to whirl at these words.

‘Come to think of it, even before his death, his condition wasn’t particularly good.’

Lenore Shand Apeto had attempted to escape to the break room, blatantly avoiding Kishiar and the Cavalry when they appeared. Despite almost colliding with others several times, including Yuder, he had drunkenly drained his cup without even checking what it was. He had been terribly disoriented, as though he were drunk.

No matter how startled he was, he wondered if there might have been another reason for his staggering.

'…For example, he might have been previously affected by a poison that causes severe thirst.'

Yuder had encountered such a poison in his past life. It was a weak poison, not deadly, but potent enough to go unnoticed in beverages or alcohol.

And the person who enjoyed using that poison the most among those Yuder knew was the Emperor of Katchian.

'Indeed, considering that this is 11 years ago, Katchian was still unskilled.'

During his reign, Emperor Katchian would never have allowed such poison to be directly used in his presence. Everything had to be done when he was absent. Many people who had angered the Emperor by speaking ill during the first disaster, the earthquake, were secretly killed by drinking the second poison that induced a burning throat.

'That poison needs to be absorbed through the skin rather than ingested… I wonder where it was hidden to kill Lenore Shand Apeto.'

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Chapter 152

To enter the party, one had to have their identification checked - a precautionary procedure. There were countless people Yuder might have bumped into during the party. Or, perhaps, something was planted in the carriage he had arrived in. Mulling over the potential factors, Yuder glared at the distant face of Prince Katchian, who was laughing away.

‘Strangely, he kept saying we shouldn’t leave the dead as a spectacle, that we should collect the corpse as soon as possible. Maybe he was trying to handle it before the poison could be detected.’

Yuder had made up his mind. He decided to investigate the individuals who collected Lenore’s corpse, the servant who had been arrested for bringing the poisoned cup, and the carriage Lenore had arrived in. There was no time to inspect everything within an hour.

“Hmm. Seems like there’s nothing else to read into. Is there anything else that could help?”

Yuder pushed back the hand that Kanna extended towards him, a shard wrapped in her handkerchief.

“Kanna, you keep that.”

“Huh? Then what about Yuder?”

“I’m going to take a quick bathroom break.”

Yuder calmly lied. Thankfully, Kanna did not seem to detect any peculiarities from him and nodded her head. He then naturally walked towards the hallway where the restroom was. The few

guards standing watch quickly dismissed him as an ordinary guest after a brief glance.

But someone coming out from the restroom didn't.

"…What, what are you! You followed me againOh!"

Before Kiolle, who widened his eyes in surprise, could complete his sentence, Yuder covered his mouth and gripped the back of his head, swiftly propelling them both into the deserted hallway. He had been planning to find Kiolle when he had a chance; it was a stroke of good luck for him and quite the opposite for Kiolle.

"Uhuhuh!"

"Quiet. I'll have you know I'm not stalking you. We just happened to run into each other. I have some questions. If you answer them, I'll let you go. If you understand, blink three times."

As Kiolle, a knight despite his circumstances, had considerable strength, it was a bit challenging for Yuder to subdue him with sheer force. So he pinned him to the floor and twisted his neck slightly, swiftly stating his intent. After a moment, Kiolle's struggling gradually ceased, and his dark, deep-set eyes blinked precisely three times in the dim light. Yuder slowly removed his hand that was pressing Kiolle down.

"Huff. You, you, a Cavalry, dare to!"

Kiolle grumbled with a face that showed he was dying to curse but couldn't due to the vow he made.

"What do you want to ask me? I've taken an unfair vow with you, but I won't do anything that could harm my family! I have nothing to do with Lenore Shand Apeto's death! So, I dont know anything you're going to"

“Hmm. I see. So, this incident is indeed Prince Katchian’s doing. Thanks for telling me even before I asked.”

“How did you know?”

As usual, his stupidity remained intact, blurting out pertinent information before even being asked. Kiolle’s mouth fell open in surprise as he received Yuder’s words of gratitude.

“You knew that His Highness the Crown Prince was involved Could it be that even Duke Peletta?”

“You don’t need to know that. Anyway, has the Diarca family only sent you today? Surely that can’t be the case.”

“Surely not? What do you mean by that?”

Kiolle, sharply counter-questioning while glaring at Yuder, soon gritted his teeth and turned his head away.

“…I came with my third older brother today.”

The only Diarca family’s offspring that Yuder remembered was Kironne da Diarca, who would later become the next Duke of Diarca. Yuder didn’t know about Kiolle’s existence in the past, so there was no way he could remember his third older brother.

‘So they sent the third and Kiolle, not the successor… It seems to confirm that Diarca didn’t anticipate this happening.’

It was rather significant that Crown Prince Katchian had carried out this operation on his own without the knowledge of Diarca, his backer. At least in his previous life, he had never contradicted Diarca or acted alone until he became Emperor.

What caused this sudden change? Was it influenced by the fact that they couldn’t cause any significant damage to the Cavalry during

the entire festival period, as Kishiar speculated? Yuder gazed down at Kiolle, deep in thought.

Perhaps it was his third brother who had informed Kiolle that the Crown Prince had meddled. After Lenore's death and during the short, chaotic time when everyone was heading to the first floor, it seemed necessary to find out what had happened between Diarca and Katchian.

"Diarca claimed to have no connection with this incident."

"That's right!"

"Then, I'd appreciate an explanation. What happened?"

"You… are treating me like a mere underling…"

"If it has nothing to do with the Diarca family, you can speak. If you tell me just this, I'll let you go."

Kiolle, his face distorted, glared at Yuder, gasping for breath for a long while. But in the end, as if realizing he was the weaker party in this situation, he gritted his teeth and began to speak.

"We didn't know the situation when that bastard Lenore had just died. After descending to the first floor, my third brother told me he had received a rebuke from the Crown Prince's attendant. He said it had something to do with the Crown Prince, and he would handle it and inform our father later, so for today, we should refrain from rash actions and go back."

"…"

"That's all there is to it. Let me go now! Get off me! You're too heavy!"

Kiolle, gasping for breath, managed to slightly lift his upper body after prying off Yuder's hand on his neck. That's when it happened.

"Hey, who's there!"

Someone shouted from not too far away, as if having heard Kiolle's voice.

'Damn.'

There was no time to flee elsewhere. So, there was only one option left. Yuder suppressed Kiolle, who was struggling to get out from under him, and feigned calmness.

"…What are you doing here?"

Two soldiers, running with lanterns, looked at Kiolle, who was lying on the floor behind the statue, and Yuder, who was on top of him, with very odd expressions. Thanks to Kiolle's intense struggling, their formal attire was disheveled, which fortunately eliminated the need for any other pretenses. It was not unusual to find nobles entangled in a corner of a garden or a corner during a party due to the influence of alcohol and the atmosphere.

Taking full advantage of their misunderstanding, Yuder covered Kiolle's face, which looked as if he might scream at any moment, with his hand and opened his mouth to speak.

"There's no need for you to know. Judging by your esteemed faces, you shouldn't be here. Leave at once."

"A-ah, yes, understood. However, this is the imperial palace… please leave soon."

The soldiers, with a look of annoyance, retreated. Yuder only rose to his feet after their presence completely vanished. As he

casually straightened his clothing, Kiolle, who had turned a mixture of red and blue, managed to stand with the help of a wall.

“You, this… this…”

“I did tell you to keep quiet.”

“Are you blaming me?”

“Of course, it’s your fault.”

What an act of pretense. Upon receiving Yuder’s cold gaze, Kiolle sharply drew in breaths, clenching and unclenching his fists.

“Anyway, I’ve heard everything I need to, as promised. Now, I’m leaving.”

“Where are you going?!”

Yuder didn’t answer and turned away. He planned to head underground first. However, not long after he quickened his pace, he stopped. He felt the surprised halt of Kiolle, who had been following behind him.

“Stop following me, Kiolle da Diarca.”

“Why should I? You kidnapped me, so I have to see what suspicious deeds you’re up to in the imperial palace!”

Had this foolish boy already forgotten the trouble he faced in Hartan when he was dealing with Apeto’s people? Yuder sighed and looked around. If he could find something small enough to just toss, he intended to knock Kiolle unconscious immediately.

However, he was unable to fulfill his intention again. Just as he was about to throw a button he had torn from his formal clothes at Kiolle, whose pupils were beginning to tremble as if he sensed

something, footsteps were heard nearby. The moment he hid behind a pillar, several men in servant clothes appeared.

“We’ve taken care of the one who moved the cup as you ordered.”

“It took longer than expected.”

“He wasn’t easy to kill. He was full of bluster, so it took some time to confirm and then deal with him.”

“What a fool. He should’ve just followed orders instead of being anxious and greedy. That’s why he ended up like this.”

They had taken care of the one who moved the cup? Were they talking about the servant who was taken away? Yuder’s senses were on high alert.

“Have you found Apeto’s servant? Did he seem to know anything?”

“He almost collapsed when he heard his master had passed. It seems like Apeto did not tell anyone and came alone, as promised.”

“Good. Now you go and report to His Highness.”

“Yes.”

As expected, they were servants following Crown Prince Katchian. Yuder watched one of the five servants quickly disappear in another direction, his breath held.

“Now then, where is the body of Apeto?”

“It’s over here. Please follow me.”

Since they had already killed the servant who moved the cup, one of the three things Yuder wanted to investigate was already

gone. At least, they shouldn’t be allowed to search Lenore Shand Apeto’s body and destroy evidence first. Yuder imbued the button he had prepared to knock out Kiolle with wind power and forcefully threw it at the servants.

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Chapter 153

“Eh? What’s that noise… eek!”

“Argh!”, “Cough!”

The fact that someone had stopped upon hearing the faint sound of a button brushing the wind made the job much easier. There could be nothing simpler than hitting a stationary target.

As the button, carried by the wind, released its concentrated force, it zigzagged across the foreheads of four men, each of whom promptly collapsed. Yuder grasped the button that had returned to his hand on the wind and looked back. Kiolle was standing there, mouth agape in surprise.

“Remember the third clause of the oath?”

“What? What?”

“Kiolle, it’s your duty to assist me as far as possible. You haven’t forgotten that, have you? You refused to leave when I told you to, so you have to help.”

“Help? What am I supposed to do to help?”

Kiolle attempted to retreat, but it was no use. Yuder mercilessly dragged him along to help move the fallen men to a corner. Despite the simplicity of the task, Kiolle couldn’t hide his terrified expression.

“Do you know who these men are? They are the Crown Prince’s attendants. Knocking out the Crown Prince’s attendants within the palace… The moment we are caught, we will be executed immediately!”

“If I’m caught, you’ll be caught too. So, it doesn’t matter.”

Yuder showed no fear at the mention of execution. After all, he had already had his neck sliced once, what would he have to fear now?

“No, not me!”

Kiolle whimpered lowly.

“I was only coerced by you!”

“You’re already an accomplice, Kiolle, just by carrying this and that for me.”

“You…”

Kiolle, who had intended to intimidate Yuder, instead received a counterattack twice as strong. He gritted his teeth and abruptly turned his head, seemingly wanting to vent his anger by roughly moving the attendants of the prince. Yuder, whether he liked it or not, grabbed the arm of the last man to be moved and dragged him along.

That’s when it happened. A sudden sharp pain shot from the inside of his right hand and pierced through his entire palm. Unconsciously wincing, Yuder looked down at his hand. His hand was covered with a white glove, so he couldn’t see inside, but he had a guess about the cause of the pain.

‘The spot is starting to spread from exerting just that little bit of strength…?’

“What are you doing? You were the one who said to move them quickly!”

If it weren’t for Kiolle, he would have checked immediately, but he couldn’t and he felt a bit frustrated. Anyway, Kiolle was not helpful. Yuder postponed his inspection, dragged the last attendant, and then started walking towards the underground stairs they were originally headed for.

—

There was always a place where no human footprints could be found, no matter where. Even if that place was inside the palace where hundreds of people were attending a party.

Yuder, with his previous life’s experience, almost knew the structure of the palace. Kiolle, who was hesitantly following behind him stepping onto the stairs leading downstairs, looked around and opened his mouth.

“You seem to have not learned the basics of infiltration. What are you going to do if someone finds out? It’s common sense to silence your footsteps when sneaking in!”

Infiltration basics? From Yuder’s perspective, who had penetrated all sorts of places under Emperor Katchian’s order, it was a laughable remark. It was clear that he was talking out of fear of the silence, so Yuder replied dismissively as if looking at a scared child.

“If you’re just talking to avoid the silence, maybe you should turn back now.”

“What, what? How audacious! I am a high-ranking Imperial Knight! I have no fear! How dare you treat me like…ugh.”

Having been struck in a sensitive spot, Kiolle, who had been angrily spouting off, suddenly staggered and hit his head on the wall. At the same time, heat rose from the seal of the oath inscribed on Yuder’s hand. It seemed that the power of the oath had activated lightly due to Kiolle’s verbal outburst. Yuder watched with a slight

tongue click as Kiolle, in his efforts to stand straight, repeatedly hit his head against the wall.

“Did you fall asleep?”

“As, asleep, my, foot!”

He had planned to leave him be if he fell asleep due to breaking the contract, but luckily or unluckily, it didn’t seem to be that severe.

‘Maybe it would have been better to knock him out with the servants before descending.’

Kiolle growled as if he knew exactly what Yuder was thinking, tightly gripping the hem of his uniform.

“If I had fallen asleep, you would’ve left me or killed me right away. That will never happen. You monster. I’ll watch you closely with my own eyes…!”

“Even if you watch, you won’t be able to tell anyone, so why bother?”

Despite having sworn to help and knowing he couldn’t act against it, he wondered why he was so furious and insistent on following.

He hadn’t even thought of acknowledging the favor he’d received so far, but being treated like a monster for going above and beyond was rather fresh. Yuder even forgot about the heat and pain rising from the hand with the seal of the contract, and let out a brief laugh.

“Did you just laugh?!”

“Quiet down. Even though everyone’s in the hall now, we never know when they could return.”

At Yuder’s response, Kiolle was taken aback and shut his mouth. From the way he frantically looked around, he didn’t exhibit any of

the dignity befitting an Imperial Knight.

For a while after that, he followed Yuder in silence, but eventually, he couldn't bear the quiet and spoke again.

"Hey."

"…"

"Cavalry. Not going to respond?"

"Why bother."

Facing Yuder, who was clearly annoyed, Kiolle swallowed his anger and spoke again after a moment.

"You're here because of His Grace, Duke Peletta, aren't you?"

"…"

"I've been watching him since we were young, so I know him well. He is inscrutable, whimsical, and indulges in all sorts of debauchery. He's currently immersed in being a Commander, but he'll soon tire of it. He always does."

So, that was what he was trying to say.

Finding it wasteful to lend an ear to Kiolle's words, Yuder quickened his pace. Behind him, he could feel Kiolle hustling to keep up.

"While a commoner might be dazzled by his outward appearance, he's not worth dedicating your life to. Do you understand?"

"Yeah. So?"

“There’s no need to do something so risky that would lead to execution if caught! Why not devote your powers to our Diarca family instead. My father would recognize your abilities and put them to good use. I guarantee it.”

He had been so dismissive of Yuder, yet now he was acknowledging his power - the irony was not lost on Yuder. He didn’t bother looking back as he moved, casually dismissing Kiolle’s proposition.

“No need.”

“Frustrating. The Diarca family is renowned for its perfection and greatness. Its far closer to the Sun God, and far more balanced than the likes of the worthless Apeto rabble or the soon-to-be-extinct Duke Peletta. The reason His Highness, the Crown Prince, ascended to that position is precisely because his lineage was recognized.”

Kiolle’s words, full of pride, bore the signs of the teachings he must have long been subject to.

‘To think they can so casually claim their lineage is superior to the imperial family; it tells me how overconfident they’ve become.’

He had a rough idea of their plan. With the death of Emperor Keilusa and Kishiar, the current imperial lineage would end. To prevent this, they adopted a child from one of the four duke families that split from the first emperor, the closest relative. That child was Katchian, which meant the future imperial lineage was set to be the Diarca family.

In a few years, the era of the Diarca would begin, and they would take the imperial family’s place. It was understandable why Yuder, who followed Kishiar, might appear laughable to them.

‘Sure, if it had been like before, things would’ve turned out just as you wanted.’

But this time was different. Even if Emperor Keilusa died prematurely as in his previous life, Yuder had no intention of letting Katchian La Orr ascend to the throne easily. That was precisely why he was here now.

“Hey, are you listening?”

“I heard. You want me to join the Diarca family.”

“That’s right. You must have changed your mind after hearing me, right? What do you say? As soon as we get back, I’ll speak to my father…”

“I refuse.”

“What?”

Yuder stopped in his tracks and looked back. Kiolle blinked rapidly, taken aback by his sudden focus.

“Do you really think that, given my capabilities, I’ve never been offered other opportunities? Of all the offers I’ve received, yours is the least appealing.”

Countless people had reached out to Yuder in his past life, however short or long it may have been. Wherever Yuder went, there were always whispers tempting him to join them, promising better conditions than being tied to the position of a Cavalry Commander who wasn’t properly acknowledged.

Even when he was imprisoned and facing execution, an emissary from a foreign country who had secretly visited the prison had promised to help him escape immediately if he would just agree to join them.

But Yuder had turned down all their offers. No sweet words had ever moved his heart.

“The choice is mine to make. And the one I chose is my Commander. That won’t change.”

Leaving only those words behind, Yuder turned around again. Fortunately, Kiolle seemed at a loss for words, so he didn’t bother him further.

‘They should have left it around here… Just as I thought.’

As Yuder had predicted, Lenore’s corpse was hidden in a seldom-visited underground liquor cellar. Yuder approached the body, which was crudely wrapped in white cloth on a cold table, without any hesitation. He grabbed the edge of the cloth and pulled it down. The horribly bloodied corpse, eyes bulging in a deathly blue pallor, was revealed. It was a ghastly sight, but Yuder inspected the body without batting an eye.

‘If he really did use a poison that burns the throat… Ill have to use fire to find it.’

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Most often, the poison was applied as a powder or a liquid, for it needed to be absorbed through the skin. At room or lower temperatures, the poison smeared on the body was invisible, but under a hot fire, it melted and emitted a special, momentary sparkle.

Yuder conjured a small flame in his hand. With a whooshing sound, a red flame appeared, and his right hand stung again.

‘… I tried to conjure it as small as possible.’

Was his condition off today? Yuder, with a furrowed brow, checked his body. He hadn’t felt anything wrong until the morning, and even now, it didn’t feel difficult to use his abilities, but somehow his body felt slightly heavy.

‘Let’s check first.’

Ignoring his mildly stinging right hand, he was about to bring the flame to the body when Kiolle, who arrived a little late, choked at the sight and covered his mouth.

“What are you doing? Don’t tell me you’re going to burn the body”

“I’m just trying to check if there’s any poison.”

Upon clarifying to prevent any misunderstanding, Kiolle reluctantly moved a bit closer.

“Poison? The bastard already drank the poison and vomited it out with his blood before he died. What else is there to check… ugh.”

Kiolle’s bold approach ended in front of the dead man’s bulging eyes, which appeared more horrific under the flame’s glow. He

backed away, covering his mouth as if he was about to vomit.

“You’re not asking me to help with this, are you?”

“I hadn’t thought of it, but I’m questioning how you became a senior knight.”

As Yuder mumbled this while illuminating Lenore’s cheek and body with the fire, Kiolle gritted his teeth in rebuttal.

“The Imperial Knights are formed to protect the capital and the palace, not to dig around in dead bodies!”

His words were reasonable. But if he only wanted to stay clean and distant, what could he possibly protect?

Yuder decided to concentrate on his task instead of replying and started inspecting the body more closely with the flame. Kiolle seemed to be ignored, as he grumbled under his breath, venting his complaints.

“You are such a cheeky and weird guy.”

””

“You think the proposal of the Peletta duke is better than that of the Diarca family? Ha. You will definitely regret this. If it weren’t for the oath, I would have reported this right away. It’s frustrating not to be able to do so.”

””

“The mere thought of the hardships I’ve been through lately due to that oath keeps me awake at night. I have no idea what you’re planning to do here…!”

“I found it.”

“What?”

Regardless of what Kiolle was saying, Yuder had found the evidence he was seeking. Under the flame’s glow, traces that looked like white powder sparkled on the cheek and chest of the body.

‘That’s the glow emitted by the thirst-inducing poison. Confirmed.’

A faint shudder ran through him at the confirmation of his suspicion. He moved the flame over to the body’s palm, and a faint light shone from there too a moment later.

“There’s a strange light… what’s that?”

“I told you, I’m checking for poison.”

“Poison? But I’ve never heard of a poison that glows when lit up.”

Seeing Kiolle’s suspicious gaze, Yuder inwardly thought that Kiolle was not entirely dumb after all.

“Indeed. It’s a poison not well known.”

‘Still,’ he thought.

In his past life, after Emperor Katchian took the throne, he and a few nobles began to frequently use this poison, starting a trend of mixing weak and strong poisons for assassinations. The fact that there were trends in assassination methods was indeed comical, but that’s how it was.

‘Come to think of it, wasn’t Emperor Katchian one of the first to use this poison?’

How could someone confined within the imperial palace know of this poison’s existence? A question he had not thought of in the past suddenly surfaced.

‘I heard the main ingredient of this poison is a mushroom… I should look into it.’

With this thought, he examined the body thoroughly. Then he brought his hand close to the brightest part of the body, the chest. As he lifted the edge of the blood-soaked formal robe and rummaged through the inner pocket, two items fell into his hand.

One was an identification badge made from carved gemstones and metal, and the other was a blood-stained letter.

‘A letter?’

As if to better see in the firelight, Yuder subtly slid the letter inside his clothing while feigning a closer look into the inner pocket. On the carefully inspected identification badge, there was significantly more poison shimmering than what had been on the clothing or the face.

‘As expected, it’s likely the poison was applied when the identification badge was checked. So far, everything’s as expected… But what about this letter?’

His heart pounded with an unexpected yield.

He put the examined identification badge back into the pocket of the formal robe and straightened up. Kiolle, who had been watching Yuder’s actions, made a face.

“To touch the part where the poison is smeared so casually, even with gloves on… Don’t ever come near me.”

“The poison is not that strong. Even if you’re poisoned, it will only cause severe thirst.”

“Is that the only symptom? Then why did that guy… Ah.”

Kiolle blinked his eyes and turned his head towards Lenore's body. Yuder quickly headed for the door before Kiolle could say more. He had one more place to go and didn't want to waste time.

"Is it all done now?"

"No. Not yet."

"What? Where else are you going?"

He was about to say it's none of your business, but Yuder quickly shut his mouth due to the sudden sense of someone nearby, pushing Kiolle inside the corridor.

Immediately after, men with unusual expressions quickly descended the stairs leading to the ground floor.

"Is there anyone?"

"They might be hiding inside. Let's go and look."

The men, who had barely reached the spot, looked at each other and exchanged words. They quickly made a decision and opened the door to the warehouse where Lenore's body lay.

Yuder waited until they all entered before cautiously moving towards the stairs. He had bought some time, so he planned to get as far away as possible in the meantime.

'Let's go!'

Kiolle, who had been hiding with Yuder, whispered with a determined look in his eyes and closely followed behind.

'I didn't expect him to follow so soon. What am I supposed to do now?'

'What to do, indeed.'

Among the men who had descended, there was none from the entourage of the Katchian Emperor, whom he had knocked unconscious earlier. If they were waiting for him when he ascended, he could once again launch a forbidden blow and give them a taste of defeat.

No sooner had this thought crossed his mind than the dormant pain in his hand began to intensify to a noticeable level. Yuder gritted his teeth and tried to ignore the growing pain.

But the pain, which he could have easily dismissed on any other day, oddly enough, didn’t subside but grew progressively worse. It felt as if a flame had been ignited on dry firewood, spreading throughout his body at a terrifying speed with each step he took. Yuder, feeling this sensation spreading, hastily drew breath.

‘What is this?’

He thought it was pain originating from the spot but wasn’t sure. This sensation, although somewhat familiar, was strangely different from the usual pain he was accustomed to. However, before he could fully comprehend what was happening, this sensation had already turned into a fire consuming his whole body, from his head to his toes.

It made his body tremble, just like a human witnessing a massive wave approaching in the blink of an eye. Realization hit him like lightning.

Thump.

He swallowed his breath. The impact hitting his heart rattled his ears, chest, and the inside of his brain.

Then, another thump. Yet another thump.

In that moment, Yuder finally understood, instinctively, the identity of this vast and terrifying sensation he was experiencing.

It was a sign of manifestation.

Like a storm, a massive whirlpool was rapidly expanding its territory within his body. Just like before. Just like in his previous life!

‘Why, why now of all times?’

But the storm that had already started didn’t allow Yuder even a moment to think properly.

The shock hit his head again, and his vision turned black momentarily. When his vision barely returned, he found himself suddenly dropping to his knees mid-climb up the stairs. Yuder gasped for breath like a drowning man and managed to lean against the wall.

“What, what is this? Is it poison? Did you get poisoned? Touching everything even with gloves on was a stupid move…!”

“Go, back. Kiolle.”

Hearing Kiolle’s voice filled with anxiety circling around him was quite an unfortunate event for his recovering ears. Yuder, suppressing the gut-wrenching sensation, barely managed to speak.

“Go straight up, pretend to be lost, and turn back.”

“What? You are.”

“Just go. I’ll manage. Go.”

“So, it’s not poison?”

Why does he keep talking when he should just go? Yuder, trying hard to suppress the sensation emerging from deep within him,

shook his head.

“No, it’s not. Just go back!…Ugh.”

As he raised his voice slightly, a jolting shock hit him from within his stomach, spreading throughout his body. Yuder, with a twisted face, lowered his head. Seeing Yuder trembling and scratching the wall, Kiolle stepped back a few paces. Fear and confusion were vivid in his eyes.

“Wha, what suddenly…”

Yuder mustered his strength and stood up abruptly. If this fever was indeed the start of the manifestation, based on his memories from his previous life, soon he’d lose his consciousness and experience sensations as if his whole body was being disassembled and reassembled. He had to escape this place before reaching that stage.

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Chapter 155

Passing the frozen figure of Kiolle, he stumbled upward. The corner of the hallway where he had rendered unconscious the servants of Katchian before descending was now empty. Fortunately, it seemed unlikely that he would have to throw the button again.

With each step, a dizzying pain surged up from his toes, as if they were burning. But compared to the urgency to reach a safe place as quickly as possible, it was nothing. Urging his consciousness, which seemed ready to black out at any moment, he managed to keep walking by leaning on the wall. Suddenly, something caught his foot. The one who helped him, when he almost tripped, was Kiolle, who still hadn't left.

"Why haven't you left yet? I told you to go…"

"Something's strange. If it's not a poison, then what on earth is it?"

Yuder clenched his teeth so hard against the inner side of his mouth that it was a miracle his vision didn't go blurry. The sharp pain managed to clear his mind a little.

"It doesn't concern you. Go back before it gets noisy."

"No. I am bound by an oath to help you forcibly because of you. How can I calmly follow along? If you suddenly die, do I have any guarantee that I won't end up in trouble for breaking the oath? You should clearly explain what is what!"

"Who's there!"

Damn. As Yuder swallowed a curse, Kiolle grabbed his arm and hastily hid him behind a large suit of armor nearby. His vision was

spinning, and his body was so shaky that he couldn’t even resist such a clumsy movement.

As soon as he hid, Yuder, gasping for breath and nearly collapsing, looked up at Kiolle, who was speaking non-stop without hiding his helplessness.

“Such a pain… I can’t even swear because of you! How… how to do it. You, it would be hard to throw the button now, right? My weapon… ah, I surrendered it before entry. Those guys, somehow I have a bad feeling, they don’t seem like soldiers guarding this place…”

“Just shut up.”

Yuder managed to utter that one sentence with shallow breaths and then roughly pushed Kiolle’s face away with his arm.

“Ouch!”

Since all weapons had to be surrendered before entering the party, Yuder was also unarmed. Yet, he wasn’t worried because he could easily manifest his ability as long as he had something to throw, like the button. However, he hadn’t expected a sudden manifestation under such dizzying conditions. Even though he had prepared for it in his own way, the timing couldn’t have been worse.

‘I could use it if I wanted to.’

But if he used his power and it hastened the impending manifestation, and he lost consciousness, the situation would get even trickier.

What should he do? As he toyed with the button in his hand and gasped for breath, Yuder suddenly remembered a precaution he had taken before coming here.

‘Ah, right. The magic tool. The bracelet.’

Hearing the sound of hurried footsteps from the other side of the corridor, he quickly rolled up his sleeve. As soon as he found the thin bracelet that he had worn inconspicuously over his white glove before coming here, he immediately crushed one of the black stones strung on the string.

With a crackling sound, the stone crumbled like a salt crystal, and at the same time, an invisible force wrapped around Yuder and Kiolle like a shield. It happened at the same time the rushing soldiers pointed their weapons at the suit of armor where they were hiding.

“Over here! I heard a noise from… huh?”

“There’s nothing here!”

“I’m certain I heard something! It was a human voice….”

The magic tool bracelet that Alik, the disciple of the mage Thais Yulman, had given them was proving its worth, despite its rough appearance. The soldiers didn’t realize that there were two people hiding behind the transparent shield.

However, the shield would only buy them a few minutes at most, so they could only hope that the soldiers would dismiss their suspicions and retreat in the meantime.

“We should still thoroughly search the area just in case…”

“Wait, step back!”

One of the soldiers, who were debating amongst themselves, suddenly yelled out. At the same moment, the armor that was blocking the path of Yuder and Kiolle made a strange clanging sound, as though two pieces of metal were colliding, and began to move its limp body and limbs.

“It’s the Armor Knight of Luma!”

Yuder, who was suppressing a sensation that seemed ready to burst out of his body from behind the small shield, turned his head with difficulty upon hearing the strange sound.

In the Deluma Palace, named after the Archmage Luma, there was an armor knight who had been enchanted and had moved about freely for nearly a thousand years. The mysterious entity that Jimmy had once said he wanted to see was apparently here today. The empty armor, brandishing its sword noisily, caused the soldiers to curse and retreat.

“Why did that thing have to be here. Why was it pretending to be a normal armor? Damn it.”

“Such a fool. Mistaking the noise made by the armor knight for a human voice? Can’t you make a proper judgement? We need to find those rats as soon as possible! Step back!”

Even after the soldiers had vanished behind the armor, Yuder did not move. The giant armor, casting red light from its eye sockets, looked around clumsily, then walked away in the opposite direction of the soldiers, its movements echoing metallically. The shield that had been surrounding the two also lost its power and disappeared.

“…Huff.”

Finally, Kiolle let out his held breath and slumped.

“To think I’d see the Armor Knight of Deluma Palace here… I’ve never seen it before despite searching so much when I was young… Hey, you saw it too, right? But what was that bracelet from before? A magic artifact? You’re a strange one. Why did you hide that?”

Yuder didn’t have the mental capacity to respond to Kiolle’s chattering. He felt as if something might burst through his skin at any

moment. Every time his consciousness flickered, his instincts screamed danger.

“Uh, haah. Uh…”

Instead of replying, Yuder suppressed his pain by scratching the ground, causing Kiolle to finally realize there was no time to indulge in his sentiments and quickly helped him up. Even the slight contact brought a pain so severe, it felt like his bones were shattering and his body trembled violently.

“Let go…”

“If you die, I might die too, so I can’t leave you. I’ll take you to the party, after that, you’re on your own! There are your companions there, they’ll figure something out.”

That wouldn’t do. There were too many people at the party. Yuder didn’t even think he would be able to handle it properly until Kiolle was gone. In a hurry, Yuder pushed him away and, nearly collapsing, leaned against a wall, taking deep breaths.

“Huff, gasp.”

A door appeared in front of his eyes, blurred by intense pain. Dragging his legs, he walked towards it and, upon opening it, revealed a small room, seemingly used for storing cleaning tools and utensils within the palace.

‘This could work.’

Gradually, making a proper judgement became more difficult, but this place seemed sufficient to hide for a while. Yuder gritted his teeth and looked back at Kiolle. He might have been better off being discovered by the prince’s servants than asking for help from such a fool, but given the circumstances, he had to try as much as possible.

“If you really want to help, there’s only one thing you can do. I’ll stay here, and as I said before, pretend you got lost and return to report to the Commander.”

“What?”

“Manifestation. Just tell him a manifestation has occurred, he’ll understand… but also tell him he shouldn’t come.”

“What? What does that mean? How can I…”

“Go.”

Before Kiolle could object any further, Yuder closed the door. If Kiolle tried to come back in, Yuder was prepared to launch the button, regardless of the consequences for his body. Fortunately, it was quiet outside the door.

Although Yuder had almost no hope that Kiolle would successfully deliver the message, even if he failed, if an hour passed and he didn’t return, Kishiar would start looking for Yuder. That was the only part he could trust.

Finally, the strength drained out of his barely standing legs. Like a wounded animal, Yuder crawled on the ground, moving towards the most secluded corner.

‘I still have work to do…’

He had to find the carriage that the deceased Lenore had ridden in. The Crown Prince’s servants had claimed that the servant Lenore brought didn’t seem to know anything, but if he looked again, he might find something different. How much of the hour Kishiar had given him was left?

As he gently bit his lip, a deep throb echoed within his body again.

“Ugh…”

Yuder swallowed his groan, wrapping his arms around his body.

‘Of all times…’

He had anticipated the manifestation was approaching. He had prepared in his own way. But this was definitely earlier than the time he had predicted based on memories from his previous life. Was it due to the spot? Or was it because he had encountered Alphas in heat?

‘No… what’s the use of speculating. It’s already started.’

There was no point trying to predict an incident after it had already occurred. This was a fact he had come to understand from a similar experience in his past life.

Struggling, Yuder got up and leaned against a corner that wasn’t easily noticeable between the walls, sitting down with his knees up. In this position, even if his strength disappeared and his sanity fled, he should be able to activate the magic tool quickly.

Listening to his rapid breathing in the pitch black room where no light penetrated, his mind started to go blank. His body, which had been chillingly cold due to pain just moments ago, was now radiating heat and dripping cold sweat. From his fingertips to his toes, his entire body writhed in pain as if his bones were being squeezed in a vice, and he groaned.

‘The full manifestation will start soon.’

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Chapter 156

Yuder had never regarded minor pain as actual suffering, but this sensation was entirely different. Despite his mind casually dismissing it, his instincts were helpless and terrified in the face of the impending upheaval. Who could possibly comprehend this horrifying sensation?

Being an Awakener did not necessarily mean one would undergo second gender manifestation. Furthermore, those who did experience the second gender manifestation didn’t all manifest in the same way.

Typically, signs of upcoming changes would manifest as persistent low-grade fevers or pain over a few days, followed by a slow transformation while being sick for nearly a week. However, there were individuals who unpredictably spewed out all the pain in a single moment, undergoing a sudden change. Yuder was one such unfortunate case.

The onset of the first in-heat period after manifestation varied as well. Some would not experience their first in-heat period for a long time after the second gender manifestation, while others would enter their in-heat period immediately after.

The cause of this variance remained unknown despite research from previous lives. The only known fact was that those who awakened their power and experienced second gender manifestation simultaneously underwent the transformation with the least amount of pain.

The body that he was familiar with, and had been living in, spewed out heat in an instant, contorting and changing fundamentally. Though the exterior appeared the same as before,

inside it had become an entirely new body. That was all Yuder knew about the second gender manifestation.

‘I was better prepared this time around. But why does the manifestation always begin at these unpredictable moments, before and now?’

If possible, he would prefer not to experience the manifestation this time. Ever since his second gender manifestation, he hadn’t been able to find a single good thing that had come from it.

‘Will I emerge as an Omega again this time?’

He could guess that he probably would, but it was unknowable. Having returned to the past, many things had changed, including his body which had become entirely unpredictable. It felt like it would have been easier to face endless enemies or giant monsters alone.

Yuder buried his heavy head in his knees. Even the soft touch of the ceremonial robe that draped his body began to feel like prickly thorns, but he had to endure somehow.

His gradually numbing consciousness began to drift in an ocean of unrecognizable memories within the endless moment of patience.

—

At that moment, Gakane Bolunwald was walking in a garden with a tired face, leaving the party hall, a spectacle of extravagant carriages lined up in clear view.

Even before the party had properly begun, the second son of Apeto had died, so he had to deal with fewer people than he had prepared for. However, there were still countless nobles who threw veiled insults at him.

Despite being indifferent to anyone's death, he felt disgusted having to smile and fend off those who boldly and oppressively showed interest in the handsome young man.

'You really are handsome. A Cavalry, you say? Wouldn't it be better for you to join our family rather than staying there?'

'If you're interested, contact me. I'll help you so you don't feel lonely.'

'Bolunwald, isn't it? Ah. I know. A famous old family from the south, isn't it? You must have had a hard time coming here. Isn't it tough to deal with commoners?'

It was somehow tolerable when they were openly interested in his youth or appearance. However, those who drained Gakane the most were those who knew of his family's downfall and mocked him subtly.

After Lenore's death, he expected Kishiar to depart immediately, but for some reason, he kept the Cavalry lingering in the party hall. Unable to bear it any longer, Gakane stepped outside, yet thinking about returning made his shoulders feel heavy.

'Where could Yuder have gone? He's been out of sight for a while now…'

Perhaps it was harder without Yuder, who, by his mere presence, used to be a solid wall providing a breather for the members. As he walked, lost in his thoughts, Gakane noticed a man wandering around restlessly not far away.

'Judging by the emblem on his clothes, he seems to be from the Apeto family?'

"Hey, why are you wandering around like this?"

“Heeek.”

Approaching the man with a skeptical mind, the man jumped back in surprise as if startled. His gaze scanned over Gakane’s white formal attire, and the emblem signifying his membership in the Cavalry.

“Ca, Ca, Cavalry?”

“That’s right.”

Upon responding with a suspicious expression, the man abruptly stood up, gripping Gakane’s arm. His eyes, reddened and soaked with sweat, glimpsed a desperate frenzy.

“Cavalry! Please, save me! Isn’t the third prince there right now? Please, take me to meet him! I beg you.”

“What are you doing… Who are you to act this way?”

“I am a servant of the second prince, Lenore!”

It was only then that the servant, who had been nervously looking around, revealed his identity.

‘A servant of the dead second prince?’

Gakane felt an odd premonition and decided to listen to the man’s story.

“It would be difficult to assist you if you do not explain why you want to meet Prince Revlin. Please, tell me first.”

“Our prince… he came here today to meet someone. He had a message for me before coming here, saying that if he cannot return, I should deliver a letter to the third prince. I didn’t think much of it then, but now that things have turned out this way…”

The servant thought that perhaps Lenore had foreseen this situation after hearing the news of his death from poison. Of course, Lenore himself might not have imagined that he could end up like this; he was merely preparing for the worst-case scenario after his meeting with the Crown Prince. But the dead could not provide answers.

There was only flogging and death waiting for a servant returning to the main house after the death of his master. The only way left for him to live was to find Revlin and deliver Lenore's letter, but with just a servant's body, how could he find Revlin hidden deep within the Cavalry? His mind went blank, unable to maintain calm.

Upon hearing the explanation from the man who had appeared before him, Gakane, who had run out of the party hall and was aimlessly wandering around, opened his mouth and blinked his eyes in surprise.

'This is… an unexpected turn of events.'

"Do you know who Prince Lenore came to meet?"

"I… I don't know. I'm just… when the attendants came and asked a similar question earlier, I gave them the same answer."

"Attendants? Whose attendants are you talking about?"

"Well, it was those with red belts around their waists"

For a moment, the image of Prince Katchian's attendants, each wearing red belts around their waists, flashed through Gakane's mind like lightning.

'The Crown Prince's attendants sought out the servant to ask him… No, it may be true that the poison that Lenore drank was originally intended for the Crown Prince. That's possible, but still… a bit…'

It was strange. Lenore only accidentally took the poison, so was there any need to send the Crown Prince's direct attendants to question Lenore's servant? Even if they were curious, they could have asked the palace guards who had already begun their investigation.

Gakane opened his mouth, feeling a strange premonition that a key to resolving this matter might be right in front of him now.

"Did you also tell them about the letter?"

"No, nobody asked about it and I didn't think to mention it either…"

"You did well."

"Pardon?"

Gakane extended his hand toward the confused servant.

"Hand me the letter now. I will take responsibility and tell the Commander right away that I will send you and the letter safely to the Cavalry headquarters."

Looking at the handsome young man's face, full of integrity and confidence, unlike his master who always scowled, the servant seemed momentarily lost for words. If he couldn't trust such a person, then who could he trust?

"Ah, understood…"

Taking full advantage of his appearance which he admittedly dislike, Gakane easily acquired Lenore's letter. He sent the servant on his way to the Cavalry carriage and told him to hide there, then immediately made his way toward the banquet hall.

At the entrance of the banquet hall, there was a man seemingly out of breath, as if he had just rushed there, presenting his identification.

“I told you, I got lost! Why do you always have to check these things!”

The man’s sharp voice and face seemed familiar to Gakane. It was Kiolle da Diarca, the son of Duke Diarca, who had previously gotten into numerous quarrels with Yuder and had been promptly thrown out.

Gakane frowned and quickly turned his body towards another entrance, hoping to avoid Kiolle’s attention.

However, as he passed by at a distance, Gakane abruptly halted, having caught a whiff of an odd scent.

‘…A scent?’

Could you call it a scent? It was something similar, but so potent it made his skin tingle - an invisible something was emanating from Kiolle.

And Gakane had smelled something similar before.

From the in-heat Awakeners of the Apeto family that was recently rescued by the Cavalry, in Jimmy’s quarters after he had manifested his second gender and had been bedridden for several days, and from many of his colleagues in the Cavalry who had passed him by in a state nearing heat.

‘…But he’s definitely not an Awakener, right?’

While watching Kiolle, who was now entering the banquet hall, Gakane caught sight of a man who had turned his head exactly in his direction from where the imperial family was gathered.

Kishiar La Orr stood up, asking for the people around him to excuse him. For the first time, Gakane saw the ever-smiling Commander's face turn serious, the smile fading away.

Upon seeing his face, Gakane felt a chill run down his spine for no apparent reason. It wasn't just him; he noticed several Cavalry members holding their breath and staring at the same spot. It didn't take long for Gakane to realize they had all manifested their second gender.

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Chapter 157

The majority of the partygoers, most of whom were ordinary people, were busy laughing and chattering, seemingly oblivious to this peculiar situation. However, only those who had manifested their second gender were unable to breathe properly, feeling the massive energy that Kishiar exuded throughout their bodies.

How could such a strong presence emanate from one person? They thought they had grown somewhat accustomed to the intense energy that Kishiar carried around, having observed him up close for a while, but the sensation they felt now was different, in a different dimension.

Just when Gakane almost leaned against the wall due to the overwhelming pressure, Kishiar suddenly withdrew his energy. Gakane, who should have quickly entered the hall alone to deliver the letter handed over by Lenore's servant to him, gasped hurriedly to endure the suddenly vanished pressure, having completely forgotten his mission.

"It's been a while, Kiolle da Diarca. I thought you had left, not seeing you around. It seems you've been rushing around somewhere."

Kishiar, who casually took a glass filled with a beverage from a passing servant's tray, opened his mouth naturally towards Kiolle, whose breath hadn't fully returned yet.

"Ah, … yes."

Even Kiolle, famously known for his unpleasant demeanor, strangely wilted in front of Kishiar. It was fortunate that Kishiar approached first since he came to meet him, but to be honest, Kishiar was not someone he wanted to meet one-on-one.

‘Did he notice something already and approach?’

Kiolle hadn’t thought that any particular energy, which only the ones who had manifested their second gender could feel, was emanating from his body. However, he was sensitive enough to notice the gazes glancing at him and Kishiar from all around. Among them was, of course, Crown Prince Katchian.

Given that the insufferable Duke of Peletta had approached Kiolle first, it was understandable for Crown Prince Katchian to be apprehensive. From afar, his third elder brother, who came with him, bulged his eyes and signaled him to come over.

Everyone seemed to be pretending not to watch, but they were all highly alert to what the two would say to each other.

‘If it were a normal situation, I would have quickly left the Duke of Pelettas presence before arousing any suspicion.’

Unfortunately, he couldn’t do that now. Kiolle thought of the man with black hair he left behind. That insolent and annoying man who only spoke without knowing the hierarchy due to his chubby face. He who had dared to threaten to put him, who didn’t even know the status of the Diarca family, into eternal sleep if he didn’t help, had forced Kiolle to make a spine-chilling vow. That man was currently enduring an inexplicable pain in a small room.

‘Why on earth did I follow him and come here to do this?’

Kiolle had regretted following him countless times on his way back here. He even thought it might be better if the Duke of Peletta and the Cavalry members were gone by the time he returned.

However, Duke Peletta was still here, and he even approached quickly enough that Kiolle didn’t even need to think of an excuse to start a conversation.

While trying to erase the face of the black-haired man who was a constant annoyance, Kiolle forced his brow to smooth in an effort to not display his discomfort.

“I stepped out to get some fresh air, but I got lost on my way back.”

“Really? Didn’t you visit here last year as well? It’s surprising that someone like you, who frequently visits the palace, would lose their way.”

Kishiar, feigning surprise, soon nodded with a smile.

“But I suppose that could happen in Deluma Palace. After all, it’s said to be a place where the magic of the Archmage Luma still lives and breathes, and sometimes paths appear that weren’t there before.”

“Is…that so?”

Damn this Duke Peletta. Kiolle cursed inwardly at Kishiar’s face, which wore a mocking smile as if he were the fool.

‘Damn it. I need to speak up and get out of here, but I can’t think of what to say because he keeps making unnecessary comments.’

Without knowing Kiolle’s growing impatience, Kishiar continued speaking with a calm face.

“You smell different today. Have you changed your perfume?”

“No, I… I’m not sure… You seem to have a keen interest in scents.”

Why was he making such a fuss about a perfume? Kishiar whispered softly in a low voice when Kiolle replied with a grimacing face.

“I’m quite interested. Among us Awakeners, there are occasionally those who emit scents that ordinary people cannot perceive. It’s much stronger than body odor, and sometimes it even rubs off on a third person who has been with the person emitting the scent. Quite a fascinating phenomenon, isn’t it?”

Kiolle didn’t understand what Kishiar meant by these words. However, upon hearing the word ‘Awakener’, he saw an opportunity to bring up his purpose and quickly opened his mouth.

“I don’t know much about the power of the…the ‘Awakener’, or rather, I’m not interested in such things. I heard there’s something called ‘manifestation’, is that related?”

He hoped that Kishiar would catch on, but his face remained unperturbed.

“Do you know about ‘Second Gender Manifestation’? Interesting. Who told you?”

Who told me? He felt instinctively that this was the optimal moment to pass on the information he had intended. Kiolle lifted the cup to his lips as if to take a sip of his drink and spoke in the smallest voice possible.

“…Someone said that if I mention this, Your Grace would understand.”

The bitter-tasting sip of drink left a trail down his throat. Kiolle, who had put down his cup, stiffened his shoulders in surprise when he saw Kishiar’s red pupils strangely glowing.

‘What is this?’

“Indeed… My assistant has left his seat earlier and has not yet returned. I thought he might have lost his way, being fascinated by the magic like you… You two know each other, right?”

“…Yes. We’ve met.”

It was a conversation without a clear subject, but both could vaguely guess the meaning.

“My assistant has been consistently requested by the Diarca Family to be sent from the Cavalry. I thought you were still angry about that incident, but it seems not.”

“To be honest, I was only intimidated.”

“Intimidated, you say.”

Hiding his lips behind the cup and murmuring in response, Kishiar’s eyes thinned into a smile.

“Thank you for telling me. I won’t forget to repay you for this favor in the future.”

Kishiar turned and vanished towards the terrace. Only then did Kiolle let out a thin breath and relax his tensed body. He realized he had been much more on edge than he’d thought, which irritated him.

‘Helping that guy…’

It was all because of the oath. If it hadn’t been for that damn oath, he wouldn’t have dared to have a loud conversation with Kishiar in front of the Crown Prince.

“Kiolle! Have you gone mad? How dare you converse with Duke Peletta in the presence of His Highness the Crown Prince!”

As soon as Duke Peletta disappeared, his third elder brother scolded Kiolle with a low voice. However, the admonishment did not frighten him in the least. He was an annoying presence, always sulking and jealous of Kiolle, for he himself could not gain even a sliver of their father’s attention.

Compared to the wrath of the dark-haired Cavalry member who'd recklessly throw punches at people, his brother's mild hostility was laughably feeble.

"I didn't say anything special. He approached me and started talking, I just responded. What did I do wrong?"

As Kiolle retorted sharply, his brother's face turned beet-red with embarrassed anger.

"I knew you were getting complacent because you're Father's favorite, but today you've gone too far. When we get home, I'm going to tell Father everything that happened today…"

'So do it, or don't.'

Ignoring his brother's words, Kiolle turned his gaze, only to be startled upon realizing that Kishiar, who'd just been in the hall, had suddenly vanished. It was a mystery how such a tall figure with a strong presence could disappear in an instant.

'Ah. That's right. I forgot to tell him that last bit the Cavalry member had said, Your Highness.'

Hadn't the Cavalry member said that Kishiar didn't need to come? A slightly uncomfortable feeling came over him, but he decided it wasn't very important. After all, he'd given most of the necessary information; that should be enough for the man to bow in gratitude to Kiolle.

Even with Kishiar briefly absent, the atmosphere of the party did not change. Some had left for home, but most were engrossed in discussing who might have been behind Lenore's death and the assassination attempt on the Crown Prince.

In the center of everyone's attention, the concerned Crown Prince Katchian maintained his dignified demeanor, but his mind was

elsewhere. He discreetly called over a servant who had been keeping an eye on his surroundings and engaged him in conversation.

“Did you find the strange man who knocked out the servants and disappeared?”

“Not yet, Your Highness.”

“Your skills are less than I expected.”

“But, Your Highness, nothing has yet transpired against your commands. They say there were no signs of anyone entering the underground storeroom, so perhaps the servants fainted for some other reason.”

“Some other reason…”

Facing the gaze of the Crown Prince, the trembling servant opened his mouth to reply.

“I thought it might be due to the magic left behind by the Archmage Luma in the Deluma Palace. There was a report of encountering the Armor Knight earlier, so I judged there was a possibility that the fainted servants might have unknowingly provoked the Armor Knight…”

“Why did you make that judgment?”

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Chapter 158

“Why are you the one to make that judgment?”

Interrupting mid-sentence, the gaze of Crown Prince Katchian appeared serenely calm on the surface, yet held a chilly depth.

“Did I ever say you could?”

“N-no, Your Highness.”

“I’ve known all along that you listen more to Duke Diarca’s words than mine. But I didn’t realize you were foolish enough to think your opinion superior to your master’s.”

Listening to the Crown Prince’s low, murmuring words, a chill ran down the spine of the servant. The Crown Prince’s face betrayed no anger.

“No, Your Highness. You misunderstand. I exist to serve you and only you. Why would you say such a thing?”

“Is that so? Then, are you saying your action of dealing with matters without informing me, who had issued the command, is merely a misunderstanding and not a sign of your disregard for me?”

“Absolutely not. From the moment you first entered the palace, I’ve faithfully stood by your side. Please don’t doubt my loyalty.”

Hearing the servant’s words, Katchian was silent for a while. This was the first time the servant had encountered such a situation since serving the Crown Prince, causing him to feel rather flustered. The majority of those serving Katchian were appointed by Duke Diarca, but until now, that fact had never been a problem.

The Crown Prince, a calm and insightful boy, had always respected the opinion of Duke Diarca, who had placed him in his current position. He had never significantly rebelled against the duke's words. But what could have prompted him to speak this way now?

'Could it be because of the discomfort he's felt throughout the festival period….'

Duke Diarca had confidently expected to land a blow on Duke Peletta and his Cavalry during the festival, but he had not succeeded even once until this day. This failure had created an awkward tension between the duke and the prince for the first time, which in turn had led to the presence of only their third child and Kiolle at today's party.

It was enough for the still young prince to grow discontent with the capabilities of the Diarca household and decide to take matters into his own hands.

'If His Highness intends to draw a line and warn Duke Diarca, how should I report this matter to the Duke….'

As if reading the flurry of thoughts racing through the startled servant's mind, Prince Katchian remained silent for a long while. Only when beads of cold sweat began to stream down the servant's bowed back did the prince finally respond in his usual tone.

"Ill let this one slide."

"Th-thank you, Your Highness."

"Act as befits your station and spare me your unnecessary thoughts. Do not give me a reason to doubt you."

"Of course, Your Highness. I promise I won't repeat such a foolish mistake."

“Good.”

After saying this, Crown Prince Katchian changed the atmosphere and issued a new command.

“Reduce the personnel searching for the assassin to a minimum and focus on pursuing Duke Peletta. He has abruptly slipped away; he must have an objective.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“And… the man I asked Duke Diarca to look into after the parade incident on the first day of the festival. I didn’t see him today.”

“My apologies, Your Highness. Could you clarify who you mean…”

“The Cavalry member who took care of the assassin in place of Duke Peletta.”

“Ah, yes. I remember now.”

Though he had spoken, the events of that day remained a faint memory in the servant’s mind. There was indeed a Cavalry member who Prince Katchian had abruptly ordered to be investigated, immediately following the shocking event when the assassins ambitiously prepared by Duke Diarca all failed miserably. However, Duke Diarca did not take Katchian’s words too seriously, acknowledging them superficially and subsequently conducting no investigation.

Prince Katchian also remained silent, and it was thought that he had forgotten about it due to the increasing tension with Duke Diarca. But, apparently, this was not the case.

“If the entire Cavalry has arrived today, he surely would have come as well. Was anyone missing?”

“Everyone is accounted for, as far as I’m aware.”

Prince Katchian turned his gaze around, scanning the various clusters of people scattered throughout the vast hall. They were the Cavalry members, all dressed in identical white formal attire.

“I could have misremembered his face, it was such a brief encounter… but I can’t help but be concerned. I was rather curious to see him again today.”

“Pardon?”

Upon hearing the servant’s confused murmuring, a trace of annoyance flickered across Katchian’s face.

“That’s enough. Go ahead and start the tasks I’ve ordered immediately.”

“Understood.”

With a hint of fear that the prince might detain him again to say something, the servant hastily retreated as if his tail was on fire. Left alone, Prince Katchian calmly returned to the other nobles and took a seat next to the fatigued Empress.

Although she was pretending otherwise, he could feel the Empress’s discomfort towards him, but he could easily ignore such minor irritations.

‘She will have nowhere to go once the Emperor dies soon.’

Despite being part of the most prestigious imperial family of the Orr Empire, both the Empress, infamous for her weak blood as a lowborn from the Herne Duchy, and Prince Katchian, an adoptive child brought up from the Diarca family, were like outsiders brought in from elsewhere.

As the childless Empress, rendered so by the barren Emperor, he could well imagine the anxiety she must feel every time she saw him. That's why Katchian felt a minor sense of relief whenever he looked at her.

Always appearing alone in the official ceremonies on behalf of the Emperor, then retiring, the Empress was like a living proof of Katchian's bright future.

"Your Highness, the Crown Prince! You have arrived."

Facing the nobles feigning concern about his near-assassination, the young Crown Prince offered a gentle smile.

—

"Commander!"

Meanwhile, Gakane, who had been unable to enter the hall and was catching his breath, suddenly saw the towering figure stepping out and hastily rose to his feet. The tall Kishiar, who had been striding along, his numerous jewels clashing and ringing, stopped in his tracks upon seeing Gakane.

The eerie feeling he had earlier tried to resurface at the sight of Kishiar, but Gakane forcefully swallowed it down. At first glance, Kishiar did not look much different than usual.

"Commander, where are you heading to?"

"You're the one to talk. Why are you here all alone?"

"I am…"

Struggling to find the right words, Gakane finally remembered the letter from Lenore tucked away in his possession and quickly pulled it out.

“I was feeling a bit stifled, so I stepped outside for a moment and received this.”

“A letter, you say?”

“The deceased Lenore Shand Apeto had left it to a servant, saying he wished to entrust it to Prince Revlin. After the servant delivered it and requested protection, I provisionally agreed and received it.”

Usually, Kishiar would have responded immediately, but he merely looked at the piece of paper without saying a word.

“…Commander?”

Upon hearing Gakane’s cautious call, Kishiar took a deep breath, closed his eyes, then opened them again.

“Be careful with that letter. It has a bad odor.”

“Pardon?”

“When you return, send it directly to my office. Also, if you return to the hall, could you find Ever Beck or Steiber Rendley and ask them to oversee the Cavalrys return on my behalf?”

“Oversee the return? Then, Commander, you…”

“I need to dine with His Majesty the Emperor today, so I may stay a bit longer. I had previously arranged this, so the assistant and Deputy Commanders are already informed. Just relay my message, and they will handle it. Don’t worry.”

“Understood.”

Before Gakane knew it, Kishiar was back to his impeccable Commander-like demeanor as if his earlier strange behavior was a lie.

“Normally, I should personally order the return, but now an unexpected matter has arisen.”

“An unexpected matter, you say…”

“Could you handle it for me?”

Instead of answering the question, Kishiar issued an order. Gakane was slightly worried, but he nodded in response.

“Certainly. Then, Commander, do we send all the troops back without leaving anyone to accompany you?”

“No.”

Kishiar, who had turned around again, gave a curt reply and looked somewhere. Following his gaze, Gakane saw a few groups of soldiers walking beyond the corridor. Judging by their scanning of the surroundings, it seemed they were investigating the death of Lenore.

Watching them quietly, Kishiar opened his mouth in a low voice.

“Asistant, Yuder Aile will stay. Don’t worry.”

Upon hearing Yuder’s name, Gakane recalled that he had not seen him in the party hall for a while.

‘Did the Commander send him on an errand beforehand?’

“Then, I’ll leave it to you.”

As soon as Kishiar finished his last words, he immediately turned around and disappeared. Only after his figure had disappeared to the end of the corridor did Gakane realize what the strange atmosphere he felt from Kishiar was.

‘Ah. I see.’

It was anxiety. Kishiar, unlike his usual self, had briefly revealed a hint of restlessness.

Why would the Commander, who always maintained a smile and poise in any situation, abruptly leave the hall in such a way? Although Kishiar, a member of the imperial family, would not be in danger moving alone in the imperial palace, Gakane couldn’t help but worry, having seen his unusual behavior. However, as a Cavalry member, Gakane knew that carrying out the task the Commander had entrusted to him was a priority.

He put the letter back in his pocket and took out his identity badge.

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Chapter 159

The moment when Yuder Aile first manifested his second gender happened unexpectedly while he was in his office, engaged in his usual reporting routine.

He could not recall exactly what he was discussing at that time. It was likely the usual banter about the day's training, fitting for a Deputy Commander well into his cups.

That day, Kishiar looked utterly exhausted, as if he had been up for several nights. Despite his fatigue, he insisted on finishing all his duties before resting, which irritated Yuder. Only later would Yuder realize that this was due to Kishiar nearing his heat. Nonetheless, it was a day like any other.

Until that event occurred.

'Why the sudden change?'

Kishiar, with a puzzled look on his face, asked Yuder who had abruptly stopped speaking mid-sentence. However, Yuder couldn't respond. By the time he had sensed something was wrong and risen to his feet, an overwhelming storm had already started enveloping his body.

'Something feels…wrong. My body…'

As Yuder collapsed, a disoriented Kishiar managed to catch him. While his actions were kind, in hindsight, it was the worst response.

The moment they made contact, the balance Yuder was barely maintaining shattered. An immense collision occurred within an invisible space.

Yuder felt as if something was breaking violently within him. All that remained in the wake of the pain swirling around him like a storm, mingled with the fragments of what had broken, was a heat so intense that it felt as though his entire body would turn to ash.

Had there been even a slight moment to resist the power overwhelming his body or to gather his thoughts, perhaps things could have changed. But such a moment was never given. Only then did Yuder realize how easily the physical could transcend the limits of reason and enter a realm where control was impossible.

And then, it was over.

He managed to regain consciousness a few times. But that was it. Yuder sunk endlessly into a daze, devoid of reason and cognition. The only thing he could do was cling desperately to what he perceived as a lifeline.

Terrifying pain. Vicious pleasure.

Fear of everything forcibly merging, knotted together like a jumbled patchwork of rags.

Just when he thought he had reached the limit, a deeper abyss opened below.

All traces of the human Yuder Aile were crushed and melted away, replaced by something foreign. No matter how fiercely he struggled, bit, or flailed, he couldn’t escape this invasion. Against this novel assault, he was utterly powerless.

After melting and merging, when his consciousness finally reawakened, a week had passed since the manifestation began.

‘I’m sorry.’

Kishiar, who had awakened before him and had been by his side all this time, muttered with a devastated look on his face.

‘It’s not your fault.’

While his mind couldn’t understand why Kishiar was apologizing, his heart flared up with intense pain.

It was merely a case of unfortunate timing. His first heat had coincided with the onset of the second gender manifestation, with an Alpha Awakener on the verge of his heat present. Regardless of what had transpired, he didn’t die, and his abilities were not impaired, so it was all right. Such thoughts should have put an end to the matter, but he could no longer accept this reality as cleanly as he used to.

Every sense of sight, sound, and touch felt strangely different, as if the very process of perception and cognition had been altered. This bizarre feeling was unbearably discomforting.

This sensation was evidence of a change that couldn’t be reversed.

Since that day, Yuder could no longer treat Kishiar as he once had. It was a fact that was strange and occasionally, regrettable. And just as Yuder had changed, Kishiar, too, had changed significantly since that day.

Their relationship, emotions, distance, and many other nameless aspects that constituted and supported the two were all stirred up beyond count. The fact that he had become a second gender manifester with no scent, unlike others, was not even surprising in comparison to these changes.

‘I’m not sure what happened to us, but I’ll try to figure it out. Definitely.’

Definitely. Though he said this, there was no strength in Kishiar's voice. He never managed to reveal the true nature of the peculiar incidents that had occurred between them for a week until he eventually died.

And the same held true for Yuder, who had outlived Kishiar. After manifesting his second gender, he met with lovers who had mixed bodies, and even those who had had children, but none of them said they had experienced the same things. There was no one who could clearly explain what had happened between Kishiar and Yuder…

"…"

Yuder suddenly opened his eyes. His mouth was dry due to pain and heat. His surroundings were so narrow and dark that he could not distinguish between the past and reality he had just been lost in. However, the touch of a small bracelet in his writhing, moving fingers helped him to regain a bit of his senses.

He was still tightly clutching the magic tool bracelet, sitting with his knees up as before. Despite his mind feeling hazy as if submerged in water, his bodily senses were surprisingly sharp and vivid, bringing immense pain whenever he moved even a little, causing an involuntary groan.

Swallowing his labored breath, he stuck out his tongue to moisten his lips, but an unbearable thirst overwhelmed him.

'How much time has passed?'

It was hard to tell time without a window. He couldn't even confirm if there was any sign of movement outside. The pain was too unbearable when he tried to move his gaze slightly, so Yuder quickly closed his eyes again.

According to the memories from his previous life, the heat came as soon as the pain ended. He didn't know if it would be the same

this time, but all he wanted was for it to end quickly. Even the sensation of sweat trickling down his forehead was painful enough to make his hands tremble.

‘Soon, quickly.’

Repeating the same words over and over, he was suddenly hit by a strange realization. Thinking back, he remembered spending his time in a similar way when he was locked up in the imperial prison, facing death in his previous life.

After the torture ended and he was thrown back into prison, there was nothing else to do but to blankly let the flow of pain pass, making it a rather unamusing time.

Remembering that era, which was now a blurred memory, Yuder lost consciousness again. Suddenly, he woke up to a perceived presence.

The door was clearly shut, and his ears couldn’t hear any sound. However, he could strangely perceive very clearly that someone was approaching from far away.

He had thought it a mistake, but it was not. Each time the slow but sure presence came closer from beyond the invisible wall, his breath quickened, and his body trembled. Yuder struggled to move within the agony, strengthening the grip on the bracelet he held.

And finally, when he sensed that the presence had drawn near, he exerted his strength and shattered the second crystal.

Crack.

A shield formed as the stone shattered from his fingertips. Simultaneously, a door silently opened, and a thin stream of light flowed in.

“…”

His eyes, accustomed to the darkness, experienced a sharp pain. Yuder, shielding his eyes from the light, was unable to recognize who was standing in the doorway. All he wished was for the person to remain oblivious to him and leave quickly.

However, as his vision gradually adjusted and the figure of his opponent began to take shape, and when it became clear enough to recognize the face,

All thoughts in his head came to a sudden halt and vanished.

Kishiar, supporting himself with an arm on the door frame, gazed down at him with serene eyes, dressed in disheveled formal attire. Even though he had put up a shield and should have been invisible, Yuder felt a piercing sensation as if his limbs were skewered under Kishiar’s red gaze, and he let out a low groan.

It was unbelievable. How could he be here?

‘Kishiar.’

His lips, which had unknowingly almost called the name, closed in silence, mixed with memories of the past.

In the silence, Kishiar’s gaze slowly swept the narrow space, then focused on Yuder. A long sigh flowed over his expressionless face.

“…So you’re there.”

“…”

“The scent was seeping all the way out here. Judging by how much I struggled, it seems like you have manifested as an Omega.”

Kishiar, who had been speaking slowly, suddenly tightened his grip on the door frame and then loosened it.

“You wouldn’t know how many thoughts came to me on my way here. If something big had happened… if someone had found you before me and took you away… It’s been a long time since I’ve had such a dizzying experience.”

The moment he took his hand off the door frame and took a slow step forward, Yuder shattered the third stone in response to the slowly fading shield. As a new shield appeared over the one that was about to disappear, Kishiar furrowed his eyebrows and looked around.

“I see magic moving… Did you bring a magic tool? If so, it’s for hiding. I have a rough idea where you got it, though”

He took another step closer. As his body completely detached from the door frame, the door automatically closed, blocking out all light again. Yuder’s body stiffened as it shivered reflexively.

‘No.’

Wasn’t it to avoid being alone with Alpha Kishiar in this situation that he had been trying so hard? Nightmarish memories flooded back in an instant, and the pain he had barely suppressed suddenly intensified. Yuder instinctively tried to retreat from Kishiar, but there was no more room to back up, already leaning against the wall.

“Are you listening?”

When Kishiar asked with a slightly strained expression, Yuder shattered the fourth stone.

“Even though you seem to be hiding from the eyes of others, this place is not safe. You need to release the invisibility to leave.”

“…”

Kishiar, who had finally approached within a few steps, slowly extended his hand. However, his hand was halted in mid-air, unable to penetrate the shield. After palpating the solid barrier and chuckling as if amazed, Kishiar took several deep breaths and slowly sank to one knee.

“Please, Yuder.”

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Chapter 160

“Quickly, Yuder.”

Thud.

As he took in a deep breath, a profound shock resonated within him once again. It was different from the agony that only served to intensify previously. It was a significant tremor, indicating that something within him, something that hadn’t existed until now, had finally opened its eyes, taken form, and exhaled its first breath.

Without realizing it, Yuder’s trembling hand reached down to his stomach. Even though he couldn’t verbalize what had awakened, he knew instinctively with absolute clarity.

The most crucial part of the transformation of the second gender manifestation had just been ‘fully’ completed.

‘Ah…’

Amidst shock and confusion, a heat that seemed to scorch his innards suddenly surged from the depths of his mind. For a few seconds, his consciousness flickered out, and when it returned, he saw the time-worn barrier in front of him slowly dissolving.

He had to shatter the last, fifth crystal in the bracelet, but his hand, weary from the dreadful pain and lethargy, could only twitch weakly, refusing to obey his will.

After the barrier completely disappeared, Yuder was left entirely exposed in front of Kishiar.

‘…So its a failure after all.’

This was the end. Kishiar would touch him soon, and no matter what happened next, it would be beyond his control. Kishiar was the Awakener he had no confidence of beating, an Alpha with immense, unending power. In his current, ruined physical condition, he was no match for him.

The same scenario from his previous life was about to repeat itself.

Overwhelmed by heat, self-loathing, and confusion, Yuder sighed and closed his eyes. Even his gasping sounds felt disgustingly repulsive, making his stomach churn.

""

However, despite his waiting, no sign of the impending situation came from the front. Even as his panting calmed down somewhat, nothing changed.

‘Whats happening?’

Finally, Yuder lifted his head with great difficulty, moving his agonizing body slightly, and slowly opened his eyes. An amused smile floated above the red pupils that had been silently watching him.

“Only now do you open your eyes.”

Kishiar was still kneeling on one knee, lightly supporting himself on the ground with one hand. Even though half of his neatly styled hair was now disheveled, his eyes were still clear, showing no signs of agitation.

“Seeing you make that expression made waiting worthwhile.”

“Commander, you?”

“Im disappointed. Hiding your body to prepare for the sudden manifestation of your second gender was a good idea, but did you need to treat me like an enemy too?”

“But, Commander, you Second Alpha I soon in heat”

With a bewildered face, Yuder stuttered out, only to be met by a pained smile from Kishiar.

“Yes. My second gender is indeed an Alpha. I can sense that you’re about to be in heat following your manifestation. Thats unique. But what does it matter?”

If he had been in better shape, he would have retorted: what do you mean, what does it matter? However, due to the pain, the only sounds escaping his lips were ragged breaths.

“Right now, I’m the Commander of the Cavalry, responsible for you. You bravely stepped forward alone for my sake, so now it’s my turn to return the favor. I can handle this much easily, so all we need to do is find a safe place within and escape together.”

Thud. A shock reverberated in his head once again.

However, Yuder was so focused on Kishiar’s words that he could barely register the pain and heat from the shock.

“Yuder Aile. Whatever you’re afraid of now, I promise it will never happen. Won’t you trust me?”

A voice that was unexpectedly soft for the situation.

As soon as Kishiar finished speaking, the massive energy that had been surrounding him seemed to get drawn back into his body, hiding itself. It didn’t completely disappear, but thanks to that, Yuder’s spirit, which had been crushed by pressure and pain, managed to clear a bit.

The dark shadows of his past, which had obscured his vision, melted away. The sight that came into focus was of Kishiar suppressing himself greatly, waiting for Yuder's answer.

'…Who, exactly are you?'

Amidst the groans that could not form into words, numerous thoughts laden with pain swirled.

How? Why? Why that far?

Various thoughts swirled chaotically, but in the end, there was only one thought left.

That Kishiar in front of him would not tread the same path as in his previous life.

Despite having no evidence, he was filled with a clear conviction, as if there was a cause. As if spellbound, Yuder nodded his head very slowly.

Upon seeing this, Kishiar, as if he had been waiting for it, immediately stood up from his place and removed the jewel pin attached to the shoulder of his ceremonial dress, smiling.

"I usually don't like forcing anyone to make quick decisions, but the situation is a little unfavorable now, so it couldn't be helped. Cooperation is most crucial if both of us want to get out safely. Now, close your eyes."

In that moment, Yuder's gaze went to the bracelet on his wrist. A small crystal hanging by a thread. He could probably break it again now, but it seemed pointless.

A short hesitation disappeared like melting snow, and Yuder swallowed his hot breath, stretching out his body and closing his

eyes. The golden cloak that Kishiar had removed from his shoulder settled over him.

“Uh…”

“Oh dear. Does this alone cause pain? I’m a little worried because you’re sweating a lot.”

Watching Yuder twitch, Kishiar, despite sounding concerned, quickly wrapped the cloak around him, completely covering him so no part of his body was exposed. It was done in a manner similar to how one would transport a patient or a corpse.

Before Kishiar’s hand, holding the edge of the cloak, could cover his face, Yuder saw the sweat beads on his face. Even though he looked fine, it was indeed difficult to remain completely calm in front of an opponent who was wildly exhibiting his power.

‘…Because of me.’

If it wasn’t for him, if he didn’t happen to manifest his second gender during his mission, none of this would have happened. Just as in his previous life, all that was left now was a sense of guilt.

“Commander, sir.”

“Hm?”

As he managed to open his mouth and call, Kishiar understood and responded.

“I apologize. During the mission, just when…this…”

“Ah. Just in case you’re blaming yourself for this situation, don’t.”

While gently supporting Yuder with one hand and holding him in his arms, Kishiar moved and opened his mouth low.

“The manifestation of the second gender is unpredictable for anyone. No matter how outstanding my assistant is, it’s no one’s fault that this has happened, as he cannot foresee the future. To be frank, I might also be to blame for leaving you to handle dangerous situations without any precaution.”

No. Yuder thought, I could have anticipated it. Although he hadn’t prepared for the exact date, he thought he had somewhat prepared. However, the outcome still turned out like this. Remembering the unspeakable incident, he let out a thin breath. Kishiar remained silent for a moment to see what was on his mind before opening his mouth.

“Do you remember what happened on the day I manifested my second gender? It was worse than what you experienced today.”

The day Kishiar manifested his second gender. He repeatedly murmured these words in his heat-soaked brain. It was a story he hadn’t heard in detail even in his previous life.

“In hindsight I’m not just ignorant about that”

“One day two years ago, when I awakened, I was lying in my bedroom in Peletta Castle. It’s a bit large for one person, but it’s not a bad place. Anyway, right after awakening, didn’t I have a manifestation? Terrified by the pain and heat I was experiencing for the first time, I thought my last day had come.”

A weak chuckle echoed gently in his ear.

“What I did then I called Nathan and made a big fuss to evacuate everyone from the castle. Then, I climbed to the top of the highest tower in the west of the castle. I knew what was there.”

”””

“I tried to kill myself with the Divine Sword Orr, which had been left unused after its previous owner used it. The divine sword inflicts a severe punishment if touched by someone not chosen by it.”

For a moment, his bone-crushing pain seemed to disappear in surprise. Yuder was relieved that his face, hidden under his cloak, was not visible to Kishiar.

Kishiar’s low and soft voice continued even as Yuder’s body stiffened.

“But as you see, I didn’t die. Moreover, I became the Commander of the Cavalry like this. Life is really unpredictable. Isn’t it? A bad thing happening today can lead to happiness tomorrow.”

So, are you happy now?

Yuder suddenly wanted to ask, but the question quickly vanished in his fevered, hazy mind.

“…Over… there! …Fo… found…!”

Then, voices of strangers came from not too far away. As Yuder stiffened his body, Kishiar soothingly patted his cloak and whispered.

“The hands and feet of Katchian who were chasing me have finally arrived. From now on, don’t say anything and just stay as you are.”

“…Huh”

Instead of answering, a hot breath flowed out between his lips. Yuder slowly released the tension from his body and let himself lean into Kishiar’s embrace. The dull and hazy pain came intermittently and it still hurt enough to make his limbs go numb, but he wasn’t as fearful about the future as before.

Despite being in the midst of a manifestation and soon experiencing a surge of heat, the fact that he was leaning into the embrace of Kishiar, an Alpha, brought an oddly peaceful feeling.

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Chapter 161

“Are you His Grace, Duke Felleta?”

“Yes.”

The scent of raw iron lingered in the footsteps of those who approached.

“And who might you all be?”

“We are the Imperial Guard, under the direct command of the Crown Prince. We are relieved to see you unharmed, Your Grace. The Prince was deeply worried when you vanished abruptly and did not return for some time. He feared you might have encountered danger, especially given the assassination attempt earlier today…”

The soldier’s gaze drifted to Yuder, wrapped head-to-toe in a golden cloth.

“But… if I may ask, what are you carrying?”

“What does it look like? It’s a person.”

Kishiar gently adjusted his grip on the figure in his arms, revealing a gloved hand from under the cloak. At the sight of its deathly pallor, the soldiers were visibly taken aback, allowing Kishiar to calmly interject.

“I didn’t realize that my brief rendezvous with my lover would cause the Prince such concern. I should express my gratitude.”

For a moment, the soldiers noticed the glove twitching.

“So… is that… person… Your Grace’s…?”

Kishiar silently flashed a grin at the stammering soldier.

“Just a prolonged secret meeting. She grew weak in the legs, so I was helping her along. She’s shy, hence the covering, isn’t she adorable?”

Only then did the soldiers notice the disheveled state of Kishiar’s hair and attire. His flushed face and sweaty brow induced scandalous thoughts in their minds.

Though they couldn’t see the face of the figure Kishiar was carrying, they inevitably pictured a petite, delicate noblewoman, much like a doe. They were entranced by this illusion, unaware that it was simply the contrast between Kishiar’s large build and the delicate white glove emerging from the cloak.

“So… that’s how it was.”

Well, of course, it was. What else could be expected from the Duke who loved to play more than to eat? As the soldiers’ expressions conveyed their multitude of thoughts, Kishiar flashed them a roguish wink that befitted his reputation.

“So, keep this a secret, will you?”

She’s still young and overly shy. Claims she can’t go home without me. As he murmured, the gloved hand twitched again, reaching out as if to grasp Kishiar’s clothing, before falling limp.

Leaving the sneering soldiers behind, Kishiar gracefully strolled out of the Deluma Palace. It was only when he was far enough to not feel anyone’s presence that he halted, lifting the cloak and revealing the face beneath.

Looking up at Kishiar, a pair of eyes, carrying many unspoken words, glared from a face pale with exhaustion.

“…I didn’t realize when you spoke of cooperation, you meant… this.”

“Didn’t I play the part well? We managed to escape, didn’t we?”

“…”

He was flabbergasted. How could he describe the dizzying sensation of being cradled in his arms and introduced as his lover? But as vexing as it was, Yuder couldn’t deny Kishiar’s quick-thinking helped them escape without incident. As a response, he heaved a deep sigh.

“…How far… are you going? Weren’t you supposed to have dinner with His Majesty, the Emperor, today?”

“That’s right.”

With a curt reply, Kishiar began to move again.

“There is a small palace where I used to live during my prince days, right next to Deluma Palace. There are familiar servants still staying there. Rest there for a while.”

“But, returning to the Cavalry…”

His words came out haltingly, but Kishiar understood Yuder’s intention without much difficulty and replied.

“No, there are too many Alphas who have not yet finished their in-heat period there. It’s better to rest alone here, where ordinary people are numerous, rather than sending you, whose manifestation is not yet complete, back alone.”

Remembering the Alpha Awakeners they had rescued from the Apeto Family, Yuder agreed that it was best to follow Kishiar’s words. His stiff body finally relaxed and Kishiar began to move again.

As Yuder looked up at his face, his vision began to blur and he closed his eyes. His breath was turning sweet, so intense that he could tell it himself, and it would be more stimulating for Kishiar, but there was not a hint of trembling in the hands that supported his body.

Why had such a being, with such strong patience, collapsed all at once in his previous life? Until now, he had thought that their in-heat periods overlapping had been the biggest reason, but now that he thought about it…

‘Maybe it had something to do with why Kishiar always wore gloves then…’

His consciousness blurred at that thought. When he opened his eyes again in sudden agony that pierced his lungs, they had already arrived in front of a strange palace.

“Ugh… uh…”

“Oh dear, you’re awake.”

“Your Highness, please hand him over. We will take responsibility and look after him.”

The two elderly servants standing by lowered their voices and pleaded anxiously, and Kishiar carefully handed Yuder over to them.

“Yuder, can you hear me? This is the palace I mentioned earlier. Hang in there until I come back from dinner. I will try to be back as soon as possible.”

He wanted to say there was no need, but he could not make a sound. Yuder grimaced and writhed, trying to make an effort, and suddenly remembered something he had forgotten as he felt a strange sensation rustling inside his clothes.

‘Ah, the letter he found on Lenore’s corpse…’

He should have handed it to Kishiar as soon as he saw him, but he had forgotten in the confusion. Although he could not speak, it seemed that he could at least hand that over, so Yuder fumbled for it in his pocket with great effort.

“Why are you suddenly doing this?”

Regardless of the servants’ surprise at his squirming, he desperately pulled out the letter and Kishiar looked at it with a strange expression.

“That is…”

Taking the letter from Yuder’s hand, Kishiar opened the envelope without hesitation and quickly skimmed the contents.

“A letter from Lenore Shand Apeto.”

He was a bit worried that the poison might still be on it, but Kishiar, a man with the divine power of a high priest, would not be affected by that. Gritting his teeth, Yuder gathered the last remnants of his consciousness and opened his mouth.

“…It’s… done… Already… taken care of. That… from the… corpse… sorry… for the… late… report…”

His body sagged before he could finish speaking. Surprised, the servants began to fuss, but Kishiar, who had read the letter in a matter of seconds, raised a hand to calm them down and slowly exhaled, raising his head. Emotion akin to shock briefly flashed across his red eyes.

“Indeed… this is astounding.”

“Your Majesty… shall we bring him inside now?”

“Let’s do that. Oh, the room where you’ll be taking him is the one on the top floor. Don’t let anyone else in besides the two of you.”

The two servants naturally made eye contact at the mention of the room on the top floor.

“That room is where you stayed when…”

“Yes. So it’s the safest place, isn’t it?”

Kishiar, who had been looking at the small palace hidden in the darkness with a bitter smile, quickly gave his instructions.

“Place a barrier around the bed. He’s only manifesting, not dying of a disease, so just change his clothes and wipe off his sweat. That should be enough. And if there are still any purification stones left there, find them and bring them to me when I return.”

“Understood.”

After seeing the servants carry Yuder inside, Kishiar immediately turned around. His eyes, while holding Lenore’s letter and returning to Deluma Palace, had already turned as sharp as a well-honed sword.

“Your Majesty, the Emperor sent me after hearing that you had left Deluma Palace. If you have any requests, please feel free to let me know.”

As he approached Deluma Palace, one servant naturally followed him from somewhere and whispered.

“So it was His Majesty. He knows everything that happens within the palace.”

Emperor Keilusa, who didn’t leave the palace himself, had placed people in various places to act as his eyes and ears. The fact that

this servant had appeared meant that Emperor Keilusa had already received the news of Lenore's death and the attempted assassination of Katchian, and had decided to assist Kishiar's movement.

"The reason I left the palace isn't of importance, so that's settled. However, this…"

Kishiar handed over Lenore's letter, which he had just read, to the servant.

"Judging from the contents of this, it seems to be something that His Highness, the Crown Prince, is desperately searching for. After I return alone, find an appropriate time to naturally deliver this to one of the Crown Prince's servants. Say that it was found while cleaning the second-floor hall. That should be believable enough."

"Understood."

Without harboring any doubt, the servant politely bowed and left Kishiar's side.

Left alone, Kishiar paused before returning alone and looked at his reflection in the window. It wasn't to fix his disheveled formal attire or hair. When he slowly brought his sleeve to his nose, the strong scent that still lingered on it was distinctly noticeable.

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Chapter 162

Kishiar, left behind, slowly lifted his hand to his nose, burying it in the sleeve of his ceremonial suit. He still could distinctly smell the intense scent that had pervaded the area.

Since his Awakening and manifesting a second gender, Kishiar had met numerous people to learn more about his newly transformed body.

This was not the first time he had encountered the scent of an Awakener that manifested Omega second gender at the same time as entering their mating period. However, he had never before felt the need for caution, nor found it to be strenuous. This time, however, the overwhelming pressure was so potent that he had to deliberately wrap himself in a cloak to prevent direct contact.

He tried not to reveal his disquiet, but just the lingering scent on his sleeve evoked a burning sensation under his skin, as if he were repeatedly downing shots of potent liquor.

It was just the initial manifestation, not even the onset of the mating period, and yet it was this powerful. He recalled the moment when he sensed without even looking at the presence of Kiolle da Diarca, who rushed into the hall with a strong scent, and turned his head.

At that time, for the first time since his Awakening, Kishiar felt the clarity of his existence as a man and as an Alpha more than ever before. The stimulation was so overwhelming that it made the back of his neck tingle; the moment he took a breath, a part of the energy he had been successfully suppressing unknowingly leaked out.

The average person would not have noticed, but a few Awakeners froze in place with a faint look of shock, allowing Kishiar

to regain control over his power.

Even though he didn't know who Kiolle's scent belonged to until he saw his face, as soon as he did, a certain face sprang to mind. Under normal circumstances, he would not have speculated about what might have happened to his usually competent assistant, but at that moment, he had a strange certainty that it was due to him. That certainty was not a product of rational thought, but something closer to intuition.

It was hard to believe that someone like Kishiar, followed by Nathan Zuckerman for a long time, had acted on a hunch.

Exhaling softly and lowering his arm, Kishiar smoothed his clothes and tidied his hair. As he bathed in the cool air, the incomplete heat that had been itching within his body gradually subsided. However, the sight of the man crouching in the corner of the warehouse, his teeth clenched, his eyes filled with fear and confusion, had not yet faded from Kishiar's mind.

A strange expression mired in refusal, confusion, and an indescribable despair.

Black eyes that seemed to have sucked in all the darkness.

The man was afraid, not of an enemy, but of an Alpha Awakener, of Kishiar.

What did the unexpected expression on the face of someone who had always moved so flawlessly and fiercely mean? Although he had pretended not to notice and left him in peace after that, the feeling of something scratching at his nerves remained. Whether this sensation was part of his intuition as an Alpha Awakener, or the result of worry for someone he cared about, he found it hard to distinguish.

‘The refusal to accept sudden changes in the body during second gender manifestation is common. I experienced it myself… But that expression…’

Those with great power often feel an intense aversion and fear when they cannot control or govern themselves. This was not unusual. Many Archmages and Swordmasters, whose names are inscribed in history, have felt the same, and Kishiar’s past life, in a way, was nothing but a result of his efforts to overcome such emotions.

So, Kishiar thought that even an Awakener with strong power like Yuder Aile could show a sense of denial due to a sudden second gender manifestation, but the despair he had shown was too heavy for that to be the case.

For the last time, Kishiar looked down at the sleeve of his ceremonial suit and stepped back into the hall.

Most of the Cavalry members and guests had left, but there were still a few guests in the hall. They were mainly people who wanted to look good in front of the Crown Prince and his faction. They whispered about the duke’s return without his cloak, speculating what he had been doing. Kishiar, however, did not concern himself with their attitudes.

He approached the Empress, who sat on the dais looking weary, with a calm smile on his face.

“It seems you’re tired. Shall I order a peppermint tea with honey?”

“No, that’s fine. My head is a bit sore, but I don’t want to drink anything more.”

Because she said this, Kishiar quietly sat down beside her. Unlike the crowd that flocked to the side of the Crown Prince, no one

approached the pair. The Empress, who had been watching them, let out a soft sigh and lightly pressed her temples.

“I wish they would leave at a reasonable time, but the Crown Prince is delaying time, saying it is hard to dissuade those who are worried about me. It seems we’ll have to leave first as he appears to have forgotten our dinner appointment tonight.”

“That is a wise decision. Not all waiting leads to good results.”

The Empress glanced at Kishiar’s smiling face, who responded readily.

“That’s very fitting for my current situation. I’ve been waiting to leave with the duke, but if I’d known he’d come back without his cloak, I would’ve left alone.”

“Ah. That is…”

“Don’t make excuses about finding a cute cat or puppy somewhere and bringing it to me. I’ll inform His Majesty.”

At the Empress’s stern voice, Kishiar’s mouth promptly closed. Instead, he smoothly changed the subject.

“I’ve been gratefully drinking the tea you shared last time. The scent was much richer than last year. It’s clear how much you enjoyed it.”

“Do you think saying that will get you off the hook?”

Despite her words, the Empress’s expression softened a bit. Growing and drying herbs for the Emperor’s tea was her most rewarding hobby.

“I’ve changed the blend and improved the species from the herbs I grew last year. It helps more with sleep and is effective in boosting

energy.”

“No wonder, I’ve been sleeping well.”

As Kishiar played along with the Empress’s words, he took a casual look around. By now, the servant he had sent should have delivered the letter to the Crown Prince’s servant, and the news would be coming soon.

Once he confirmed what Katchian was planning after receiving the letter, he would be able to understand the emotions and determination with which he started this matter.

“Your Highness.”

Sure enough, as if they had been waiting, Katchian’s servant appeared from the back and whispered something into his ear. The Crown Prince’s expression changed, and he stood up from his seat.

‘It seems he intends to handle this immediately.’

As Kishiar casually watched him, Katchian raised his voice and opened his mouth.

“Is that really true?”

“Yes.”

“What is the matter, Your Highness the Crown Prince!”

The young scholar who had been loitering nearby called out, prompting Crown Prince Katchian to turn his head. The prince’s handsome eyebrows furrowed and he slumped back into his seat, his gaze shifting towards the Empress who sat on the stage and the Kishiar beside her.

“…Apparently, a cleaner just found this letter while cleaning the second-floor hall. They said it belongs to the deceased Prince Apeto

the Second.”

The Empress, startled by these words, widened her eyes.

“A letter?”

“Yes. But the content is…”

The Crown Prince let his sentence trail off, prompting a response from the Empress.

“What are you trying to say about the content? Send it over here.”

“I apologize, Your Majesty. Here it is.”

The chamberlain brought the folded letter on behalf of Katchian to the Empress. A spot of blood, presumably from the poisoned Lenore, stained the outside, so the Empress did not touch it herself but instead instructed the chamberlain to read it out loud.

Kishiar, who already knew the contents of the letter which had passed through Yuder’s hand to him, then back to Katchian, sat quietly by the Empress’s side, listening to the reading.

I have deeply pondered over Your Majesty’s words. I, Lenore Shand Apeto, though I am originally a man of Apeto, realized that time is not important in following the right path. You must have chosen me to grant this revelation.

On the promised day, I will lay down at your feet and pledge my loyalty.

The letter was quite brief, but the content was anything but ordinary. Everyone who had been holding their breath stirred all at once.

Since the author himself mentioned his name, there was no doubt who wrote the letter. However, the problem was the title of the

recipient.

Lenore referred to the recipient only as “Your Majesty” in the letter. Of the attendees at the party that day, only Katchian, the Crown Prince, and Kishiar, the Duke, could be called “Your Majesty”. And among them, if one were to consider who had a deeper relationship with Lenore Shand Apeto, it was undeniably Kishiar, who exerted power to blockade his Family.

Lenore, a man of Apeto who wrote a letter pledging loyalty to ‘Your Majesty’ for ‘following the right path’, escaped from his blockaded Family Mansion alone and came here. If he had come here at Kishiar’s call, the possibility that his death was not a simple coincidence was high.

Would Duke Peletta have acted alone? Was it actually the Emperor’s will that Lenore came here? Perhaps the culprit who attempted to poison the Crown Prince was not an outsider but someone involved in this incident? If this matter was truly the Emperor’s will, it would be difficult to decide where to stand next.

In an instant, a whirlpool of conspiracy theories spun in the minds of many.

Amidst the numerous gazes directed at him, the Empress clenched the armrest of her chair with a pale face.

“…Duke.”

“It seems unlikely that the meal the Emperor wished for today will be possible.”

However, trapped under numerous gazes, Kishiar only looked down on everyone with an inscrutable smile.

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Chapter 163

“The atmosphere is so unsettling, it ruins my appetite.”

“Is that all Your Grace, Duke Peletta, has to say after hearing the contents of the letter?”

The voice that questioned him came from a man standing closest to Crown Prince Katchian. He was the third son of a noble count family, a knight affiliated with a rather well-known order. Although he had a reputation for his fiery, justice-driven nature, those who knew him were well aware that this was simply a faade to mask his violent temperament, which often entangled him in brawls.

Most of those remaining in the room were eager, young men, with little inheritance and great ambition. They saw their future in the prince who was to be the Empire’s next ruler, and they were desperate to gain his favor. Hoping to seize this opportunity to make a name for themselves, they loudly expressed their opinions with barely concealed intentions. In response, Kishiar pretended to be ignorant and tilted his head.

“What should I have said then?”

“Just a few days ago, Your Highness proclaimed a thorough investigation into the Apeto family, ensuring they would face the judgment of the law. And yet, it has been revealed that you secretly invited the young Lord Lenore here. How can you say that you have nothing to say? Shouldn’t you clarify the true nature of your relationship with him?”

The young knight brazenly raised his voice.

“So, you seem quite certain that I invited him.”

“Are you saying you did not?”

The young knight thought that Kishiar was lost for words, hence his pretense of composure. The rumor that Duke Peletta, who lived solely by leaning on the Emperor’s generosity, was merely a pretty face who could hardly read a book, was well-known.

This was his first time seeing the Duke up close, but looking at his appearance, sans the cloak that had somehow been lost from his formal attire, he thought the rumor was indeed accurate.

Seeing the eyes of those observing the situation, regretting that they didn’t act first, bolstered his confidence.

“Aren’t we still unsure if the letter is genuinely from the second prince of Apeto?”

“There are circumstantial pieces that one could reasonably deduce from, are there not? If Your Grace fails to give a convincing explanation and continues to avoid answering, some might think that the death of Lord Lenore was more than just a coincidence.”

“Circumstantial conjectures, is it? Alright, let me try my hand at that.”

A strange smile appeared on Kishiar’s face as he echoed the young knight’s words.

“Let’s concede for a moment that, as you suggest, the second prince of Apeto did come to meet me. However, the letter only promised a meeting. His death was an accident, so by your logic, shouldn’t I be quite surprised that the person I was supposed to meet suddenly died? I think my conjecture makes more sense, what do you think?”

“What are you saying? This situation is entirely different…”

“Oh? So you still believe that I deceived the second prince of Apeto into coming here and that his death is closely related to me? If you want to believe what you want to believe, then there’s nothing more I need to say.”

“I… I didn’t exactly say that.”

Although he was indeed leaning towards that notion, the young knight didn’t want to be cornered by directly stating it, so he took a step back.

“What I am saying is… given that Lord Lenore’s death is related to the failed assassination attempt on the Crown Prince, we shouldn’t overlook the shadows of doubt in this case. It’s with this in mind that I felt the need to advise…!”

“You make such allegations without any suitable evidence, even though my name is not even written in the letter. You should also be prepared to take responsibility for the words you have spewed. Do not call irresponsible statements advice. You might regret it later.”

The young knight was silenced by the Duke of Peletta’s sarcastic rebuttal, laced with laughter and cutting through his speech. The thought of being pushed back verbally by a Duke he had just mocked sparked a surge of unbearable shame and anger.

“It seems… you’re forcing me to close my mouth.”

“Force? This is advice, much more practical than what you’ve given. If you can’t differentiate, make sure to learn.”

Momentarily speechless, the young knight tightly clenched his fists, his face turning beet red.

“Your words are too…!”

“Step back.”

Then, the Crown Prince, standing behind the young knight, raised his hand and spoke with weight. As all eyes were drawn toward Crown Prince Katchian as he slowly spoke to Kishiar.

“Exactly as you said, any argument without solid backing, no matter how plausible, is nothing more than an irresponsible falsehood. I understand your displeasure entirely. But, considering he said it out of concern for me, could you, Duke of Peletta, possibly let it slide?”

The Crown Prince protected the young knight. The atmosphere, once again, seemed to lightly ripple. Kishiar directed a friendly smile at the innocent face of Crown Prince Katchian, who seemed to be in a slight predicament.

“Of course. I wasn’t that bothered in the first place.”

“I’m relieved. However…”

Katchian’s gaze shifted towards the chamberlain who was still politely holding Lenore’s letter.

“The Duke said this letter might be a fake, but I don’t think so. We should find out through this letter who that poor soul was summoned by. Wouldn’t the family’s grief be lifted then? Hence, I’m considering ordering a more detailed investigation… Would that be okay?”

His rhetoric was sophisticated. By implying that Kishiar had some hidden agenda with the letter and skillfully asking for his consent, he made a high-class move. As a result, the surrounding gazes became sharper, but Kishiar examined the prince’s face with a deep smile, completely unfazed by their stares.

‘Indeed. Is that the real claw you’ve been hiding all this time?’

Crown Prince Katchian had never openly displayed his feelings towards the Emperor or Kishiar since he ascended to his position

four years ago. All the attacks were always through the Duke of Diarca.

However, the prince today stood alone, not hiding behind anyone. The undisguised hostility of the prince who stepped out alone for the first time without hiding behind the Duke of Diarca appeared strikingly clear to Kishiar.

‘It was worth pricking his nerves during the festival.’

The reason Crown Prince Katchian attacked so promptly was probably because he had concluded he could no longer solely rely on Diarca. Kishiar didn’t expect him to take such a bold step as killing Lenore, but this audacious attack was oddly satisfying to him.

If it were Duke Diarca, he wouldn’t have stirred himself over such a trivial matter, but Katchian was still a teenager, and at that age, even a slight tremor can feel like an earthquake. A daring method of attack is good for puncturing the opponent’s defense, but it can also leave you open to a counter-attack. He was going to learn this fact slowly over time.

Kishiar, trying not to give Katchian any cause for suspicion, made an effort not to appear too delighted as he nodded his agreement.

“An in-depth investigation… Of course, if needed, it must be done. We can’t halt the ongoing investigation of the Apeto family by the Cavalry due to this issue, but if you request cooperation, I’ll gladly provide it.”

As he drew out his answer in a reluctant manner, the people surrounding Prince Katchian couldn’t hide their excitement, as if Kishiar’s guilt was already confirmed.

“In that case, I must retire early, for my head is starting to ache. I won’t be able to attend the meal we had scheduled for today, but I

plan to spend the night in the palace, so if you need me, please contact me.”

Kishiar, leaving behind those who reveled in foreboding his misfortune, exited the hall. Shortly after, the Empress followed him out of the hall.

“Duke! Please wait.”

“Yes. I knew you would come, so I’ve been waiting.”

Seeing Kishiar standing nonchalantly just outside the hall, the Empress appeared briefly taken aback. However, she quickly regained her composure and lowered her voice.

“What are you thinking, exactly? You didn’t really summon Apeto’ second son, did you?”

“You still don’t know me well. Of course, I did not.”

At Kishiar’s straightforward reply, the Empress’s eyes flickered.

“Then why on earth are you acting like this…?”

“One must take a hit to figure out the opponent’s purpose.”

Of course, in reality, he had not taken a hit, and had managed to gauge all of Katchian’s maneuvers as he had wanted. However, Kishiar swallowed these words, flashing a smile instead.

“Please tell His Majesty the Emperor that I’m sorry I cannot join him for dinner. I’ll be going to the Eternal Palace where I spent my princehood.”

“Are you really going just like that? Since you came all this way, wouldn’t it be better to meet and talk with His Majesty directly?”

“That won’t be possible today. There is someone waiting for me.”

Normally, for his brother's sake, he would have chosen to have dinner with the three of them, but today was different. As he pictured Yuder Aile's pale face, still suffering from the pain of a manifestation, he shook his head. At this, the Empress's brow furrowed.

"Is it someone related to your lost cloak?"

His sister-in-law occasionally had an astonishingly sharp intuition. Kishiar hesitated for a moment before admitting it.

"How did you guess?"

"I couldn't say it earlier, but somehow, ever since you returned without your cloak… you've seemed a bit different."

"Different, you say…?"

"How should I put it? You seemed like someone eager to get up and leave. If it's not because of the Crown Prince, there can be only one reason left."

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Chapter 164

Uncharacteristically, Kishiar delayed his reply again at the words of the empress, who carefully chose her expression. It felt as if he had been unexpectedly pricked, far more so than any insubstantial attack from Katchian.

“Was I wrong?”

“No.”

After responding reflexively, Kishiar rubbed the corners of his mouth where his smile had faded, a slight frown appearing on his face.

“You’re right. I… I did.”

“But why do you look like that?”

Upon hearing the Empress’s suspicious question, Kishiar quickly changed his expression. His usual smile surfaced between his fingers.

“I’m just surprised. You seem to know me better than I know myself.”

“You said earlier that I still don’t know you well, and now you’re saying that I know you too well. Which one is true?”

“Both, of course.”

After saying that, Kishiar quickly added a witty explanation before the Empress could respond.

“It’s a secret, but I’m actually like a box with about six sides. When one side is visible, the other side is naturally invisible, so it’s only natural that you might know me well and yet not know me at all.”

“My, you’re quite the talker.”

The Empress momentarily forgot the gravity of their situation and let out a deep laugh, as if sighing.

“I wish His Majesty could also tactfully handle matters like you do… “

A candid remark slipped out unintentionally, carrying with it an unmistakable sorrow. Kishiar quietly asked a question as he looked at the shadowed face of the Empress.

“Is His Majesty’s condition getting worse?”

The Empress, who had been biting her lips tightly, nodded.

“His sleep time has decreased. The palace head said that he wakes up often due to pain, even when he’s asleep. But whenever he sees me, he always says he’s fine… Sometimes, I find that the hardest to bear.”

“He must be worried that the Empress might harm her health with her concerns. Don’t fret too much.”

“I know. It’s His Majesty’s way of showing affection to me. Such a considerate treatment to me who can’t even properly accompany the Crown Prince to dinner. But knowing makes it even harder sometimes.”

A fleeting emotion of regret passed over the face of the Empress as she vented her pent-up words.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have made such inappropriate remarks at the end. Please forget them.”

“Your Majesty.”

The Empress, about to turn away, turned her head at Kishiar’s call. A wetness clung to the corners of her shadowed eyes. Kishiar scanned the maidservants following behind her and then spoke softly.

“We’ve been investigating an item in the Cavalry for a while. You may already know.”

The Empress blinked at his sudden change of topic. Nonetheless, Kishiar continued.

“Thanks to the competent members and the mage, the investigation is proceeding in a rather interesting way. We don’t know the result yet, but everyone is trying to help His Majesty in their own way.”

“…”

“Who helped more or less, does it matter that much? Two years ago, if it wasn’t for the letters you two sent me, I wouldn’t have been able to hang on till the miraculous moment. His Majesty would be happy just knowing you are by his side, so do not doubt his feelings.”

“Duke…”

“And the incident that occurred today was an attack intended for me and the Cavalry. It was wise of Her Majesty the Empress not to confront it directly. Those who were at the scene will likely regret today’s actions. You may look forward to what follows.”

At his words, the corners of the Empress’s lips trembled minutely before they turned up slightly.

“Thank you for telling me that.”

After the moon’s shadow passed over the corridor, Kishiar and the Empress parted in opposite directions, each heading their own way.

—

His body felt as heavy as water-soaked cotton.

Yuder opened his eyes dully and exhaled deeply. Beyond his hazy view, he caught a glimpse of the darkened night sky.

‘Where am I?’

Thinking it a familiar sight, he found himself lying in the most secretive space within the Commander’s quarters, located at the very top of the Cavalry barracks. A bed made of beautiful, glossy white wood and stone. A towering dome-shaped ceiling, paneled with glass, allowed him to gaze at the sky. Everything was just as he remembered it, nothing unfamiliar.

‘…What happened? Did I… dream?’

Could it be that after he was executed, the whole sequence of events, where he turned back the time of 11 years and started from the beginning, was all a dream and the reality was him lying in the Commander’s bedroom now? As soon as he took a deep breath at this chilling conjecture, a large hand reached out from behind and pulled him close, wrapping around his waist.

‘…Are you awake?’

Yuder’s body stiffened in surprise, but slowly relaxed when he heard the low voice. Without seeing who it was, Yuder immediately recognized the owner of the voice. It was Kishiar La Orr.

The sensation of him breathing lightly with his nose buried in the back of Yuder's head sent a ticklish shiver down his neck.

'I didn't mean to make you faint… I'm sorry.'

'…It's okay.'

After hearing his own voice automatically respond, Yuder finally realized what was going on. It wasn't that he had dreamt of turning back time, but this moment was the real dream.

Indeed, it was easy to be confused since in the decade since becoming the Cavalry Commander, he had never once changed the arrangement of the furniture or items inside the Commander's room. As his muddled mind registered the dream, he began to feel an overwhelming fatigue.

As all the strength left Yuder's body, the hand that had been holding his waist moved slowly, caressing his stomach and chest. The touch was gentle, as if trying to soothe a child to sleep, but it was too affectionate to be seen as just that.

…Come to think of it, it was bare.

His muddled mind suddenly realized that the hand touching him was not, as it usually was, covered by a glove. The surprise came to him late.

Was there ever a day when the man who always wore gloves except in pitch darkness, acted this way? He wanted to look at the state of the hand caressing him, but just as he tried to lower his head, a nip at the soft skin behind his ear sent his thoughts scattering.

'…Hmm.'

As Yuder shook and shivered, the caressing hand became more audacious. Though it was a familiar touch, perhaps due to the fading consciousness of the dream, it felt strange and peculiar, as if he was experiencing it for the first time.

Yes, there was a time when he experienced such a moment. After the man behind him had died, there was not once when he felt anything other than repulsion at the touch of another, but there had certainly been a time when he clenched his teeth in excitement, a weak thrill bubbling within him as another touched his body.

“Hadn’t you said you would go to Peletta Castle when night fell?”

“So I did.”

“Then why…”

“Why, indeed.”

His slow, echoing reply sounded somehow cold and melancholy, or perhaps it was just his imagination. He wanted to look behind him, but his body wouldn’t obey, and he was held so tightly, without any space to spare, that turning his head was difficult.

“Is it regret, since you thought this would be your last night here?”

“Regret… yes, perhaps that’s it.”

“What do you mean by ‘perhaps that’s it’…”

“Because everything you say is correct.”

After spitting out incomprehensible words, Kishiar took another deep breath. Even though it was just a breath that resembled a sigh, Yuder could feel a shiver run down his spine.

The deep breathing. The unstable energy. A voice that betrayed fatigue and weakness. Even in the darkness, Yuder could feel

Kishiar as though he were touching him with his own hand. It was a strange sensation of connection with another, as if he had eyes on his back, so alien that he tensed up. Then, in a faint voice, Kishiar called him.

“Yudrain.”

“…”

When he didn’t reply, the voice called out again.

“Yudrain.”

“Yes.”

He answered, as if shaking off the cold sensation sticking to the back of his head. The reply came very late.

“You will need to get used to that name now, are you alright with that?”

“After all, there are hardly any who will call me by the Commander’s name…”

“Indeed.”

Interrupting Yuder’s words, Kishiar chuckled softly. It was a laugh that felt strangely melancholic.

“But it’s a name chosen with good intention. Please cherish it.”

A name chosen with a good intention. Hearing those words, Yuder remembered something suddenly and felt surprised.

The name Yudrain Aile was given to him when he ascended to the position of Commander along with the title of Count. He remembered that clearly but had completely forgotten who had given him the name Yudrain and how he received it.

So it was Kishiar who had given him that name.

But he still couldn’t recall what it meant.

“Come to think of it, I forgot to ask what it means. You only said it was High language…”

Even the Yuder of the past had the same thoughts and asked a belated question. The hand stroking his skin stopped right where it was. It was right in between his chest, right below the likely position of his heart.

“…”

In the instant where he was held captive by the chill he felt on the skin above his vital point, Yuder woke up again from his dream.

This time, he truly was in a strange bedroom.

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Chapter 165

‘Where is this?’

“Have you awakened?”

Turning his head towards the voice that resonated from the side, he saw a servant smiling kindly as he offered a polite greeting. It was only after seeing him that he managed to remember where he was. Kishiar had said he would leave him at the palace where he had been staying as a prince, so this was probably the place.

His mind was still fuzzy from the aftermath of the dream, but as he drew in slow breaths, the fog in his mind began to clear.

He was dressed in clean indoor clothes instead of formal attire. While he was unconscious, someone must have changed them. A peculiar discomfort washed over him as he observed his bare hands, devoid of any gloves. Despite spending more days without gloves than with, it was a strange matter to now find the lack of them uncomfortable.

He looked at a spot on his right hand, about the size of a gold coin, remembering the intense pain he had felt there, right before the manifestation began. Although the spot had not spread beyond this size, he couldn’t help but think the severe pain was related to his second gender manifestation.

‘Is the manifestation complete now?’

The energy within his body had almost stabilized. His muscles still screamed whenever he attempted to move a little, and fatigue and warmth were still present, but his head was far clearer than before he had lost consciousness.

‘Surely, a week hasnt passed while I was unconscious like before.’

Despite his improved condition, an ominous thought crossed his mind. Quickly raising his head, he turned to the servant and opened my mouth.

Icough, cough.

“You should drink water first before you speak.”

The servant rushed to support him, who had ended up coughing due to the dryness of his throat while trying to ask how long he had been unconscious, and brought a cup of water to his lips.

“Do not gulp it down. Please, sip it slowly, dividing a mouthful into five parts.”

The servant expertly lifted him slightly, helped him lean his head against a large cushion, and placed the cup against his lips. As the servant suggested, he divided one gulp into five and swallowed it slowly. It felt as if water had been sprinkled over a wound, the soreness in his throat subsided, and his breath became much easier.

“Thank you.”

“It’s all right. I was only doing what I should.”

“How long has it been since I came?”

“It’s been exactly a day and a half since you arrived here.”

A day and a half. He gaped in surprise, not knowing how to interpret the expression on his face, the servant cautiously continued.

“You had been suffering from high fever the whole time, and it’s only been a few hours since the fever subsided. If the fever had

persisted any longer, the Duke I mean, the Prince might have had to call for a priest. It’s truly a relief.”

“Has the Duke been here?”

“He had to leave a few times to attend to matters, but he’s mostly been here. He’s probably working outside the isolation wall right now.”

Kishiar had been here the whole time. Conflicted and unsure how to respond, he blinked for a moment and then recalled an unfamiliar term from the servant’s words.

“But, what is an isolation wall?”

“Ah It refers to a special barrier present in this palace. There are three installed in this bedroom, and the Duke ordered all of them to be drawn.”

After he had spoken, he rose from his seat and approached the wall beside the bed. Astonishingly, as soon as he touched the wall, it receded backward, folding aside like a lady’s fan. Yuder’s eyes widened as he realized that behind the now collapsed wall, furniture and windows previously unseen now stood revealed.

At the same moment, the servant, who had returned, opened his mouth.

“That wall which just disappeared is the first isolation wall.”

“Does that mean there are two more walls like that?”

“Yes. One on each of the three sides, excluding the back wall.”

The servant’s response was polite and serious. Yuder stared at the other two containment walls, which, for the life of him, looked nothing but real walls. Such cleverly crafted fake walls. Reflecting on

his past life, he was even more astonished that he had never heard of a palace with such a mechanism installed.

If you look at the name, it was clearly a wall created for the purpose of isolation. This place was the palace where Kishiar, the former prince, had stayed, and it was his bedroom. What on earth could be the purpose of creating isolation walls centered around a bed in such a place?

“What is… the purpose of that wall?”

“It’s a wall for isolation and protection, as the name suggests.”

After answering thus, the servant turned to Yuder, his wrinkled eyes smiling.

“Perhaps you would find it better to ask the Duke instead of me if you are curious? I was just about to go and inform the Duke that you, Mr. Aile, have awakened.”

With that one sentence, the servant, who had caused Yuder to close his mouth, said he would bring some edible food and disappeared lightly toward the open wall.

Once left alone, his body felt heavy again as if he would fall asleep, but having slept so long, he couldn’t close his eyes again. Instead, what filled his mind was the servant’s words that he had awakened after a day and a half.

‘I had thought it would take a week to open my eyes as it did in my previous life…’

Come to think of it, in his previous life, the second gender manifestation itself had been completed in a much shorter time than others. Hadn’t others suffered all at once because they went through the slow changes and the associated pain bit by bit over a long time?

Then, it wasn’t too strange that the heat that had come with it ended quickly as well.

Among the Awakeners he had met in his previous life while being a Commander, there were several who, like Yuder, had undergone the second gender manifestation and the heat simultaneously. Most of them had typically manifested their second gender over a week, and he had heard that the heat naturally subsided around the time the manifestation ended.

Back then, he didn’t think it was strange as he assumed that when the manifestation and the heat came together, they typically subsided in about a week. But on reflection, there was no reason for him, who had finished the manifestation faster than others, to extend the heat for an extra week.

‘Then, is this what would have happened if nothing had happened, and rather, was it the situation in my previous life that was abnormal?’

He wasn’t entirely without a guess. Around the time Yuder died, among the Cavalry members, there was a rumor that if those in heat mingled their bodies, they would influence each other, making their heat period longer than usual. Someone as powerful as Kishiar could have easily turned that rumor into a fact.

In the end, the only variable that he could guess at was that Kishiar’s in-heat period had not overlapped with his this time, just that and nothing more.

‘Just that… and yet all these events ended so easily.’

Ensnared in a strange feeling while comparing the past and present, Yuder gently shook his head.

‘No. That’s not it.’

It wasn’t just good fortune that resulted from their heat period not overlapping. It was still vivid in his memory how much Kishiar had suppressed himself, trying to reassure Yuder in the storage room.

‘I am the Commander of the Cavalry, responsible for you. You took a stand for me, now it’s my turn to return the favor.’

Could he just dismiss the shock he felt when he heard that voice resonating in his ears at the moment he was about to surrender to despair, as simple good luck?

Superior abilities didn’t necessarily translate into superior self-control. In the world, those with great power often felt less need to exercise restraint, especially for the sake of the weak.

Yet, Kishiar had carried Yuder here, joking around as if nothing was wrong, sweating from his forehead. Yuder believed it was not right to dismiss Kishiar’s efforts to save him as a fortunate situation caused simply by their heat period not aligning.

Remembering his face as he casually draped his cloak over him made Yuder’s heart lurch.

This time, nothing had happened. Really, nothing at all.

So, even after the second gender manifestation had ended, he could face Kishiar with a clear mind, without any regrets.

It felt like an old thorn deeply embedded somewhere in his heart had finally been pulled out. Overwhelmed by a feeling of liberation, or something he couldn’t quite identify, Yuder took a deep breath without realizing it. At that moment, the servant entered, pulling a tray.

“Upon hearing you’ve woken, His Grace was overjoyed. He said you haven’t eaten for over a day and suggested you eat this soup before you see him.”

“What… What is His Grace doing right now?”

Yuder asked, a bit hesitant. the servant, seemingly oblivious to his hesitance, gave a gentle smile and served the soup bowl and spoon from the tray.

“Today officially marks the start of the trial with the Apeto Ducal House. It seems he’s been continuously issuing orders in relation to that. Now, please eat.”

The soup, cooked with finely chopped vegetables and gently minced chicken for easy digestion, was tender enough not to need much chewing, and it had a savory taste. Yuder, who thought he had lost his appetite, felt an astonishingly strong hunger after one spoonful of soup, and began eating rapidly.

“You shouldn’t eat too quickly. Please, take your time.”

Even after getting reprimanded midway, Yuder finished the soup. the servant, with a contented look in his eyes, cleared the empty bowl.

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“I was worried that the food might not suit your palate, but seeing this, I think you’ll have no problem eating a regular meal for dinner. It’s a relief. Do you have any food preferences or aversions?”

“No”

As he shook his head to indicate none, a smile spread over the wrinkled corners of the servant’s eyes.

“Understood. I’ll prepare everything accordingly then. There’s no time to waste if I have to prepare. Do you need to bathe before then?”

” I’m fine.”

He didn’t know what Kishiar had told the servant, but the servant was exceedingly kind to Yuder. It was an excessive treatment for a 20-year-old young man who, despite serving the palace owner, was of humble origin and had only recently received a last name. Nevertheless, the servant diligently asked several times if there was anything else Yuder needed before finally turning away.

‘I’d better tell Kishiar straight away that I’m going back to the Cavalry as soon as I see him.’

Soon, the sound of a door opening from afar reached his ears. The person who strode in with a large step was, fortunately, not the returning servant but Kishiar La Orr.

“You don’t look well. Are you feeling better now?”

Kishiar was now clad in a white uniform, different from the last time he saw him. Meeting his slightly tired smile, Yuder was caught

in a strange emotion and forgot all his thoughts. The determination to return to the Cavalry and everything else melted away from his mind. His response felt like someone else's voice, strange and unfamiliar.

"I'm fine"

"Fine, you say. Your lips are all cracked."

As he chided him, Kishiar took a seat on one of the chairs nearby. Although it was quite a distance from the bed, there was no problem for conversation. The sensation of his gaze sweeping over him was so vivid that Yuder unintentionally held his breath.

Despite simply sitting across from him, it was clearly different from before the second gender manifestation. A new sensation that had not been there before recognized the clandestine and enormous presence Kishiar embodied. His more sensitive than usual sense of smell, as the heat was not fully over, detected a cool scent different from the sweetness of perfume.

Compared to before the manifestation, it was no exaggeration to say he had been looking at Kishiar with a thick wall between them.

'Was it like this before'

He must have felt this sensation in his previous life, but something was different now. He couldn't identify what that difference was.

In an attempt to distance himself from the unfamiliar sensation different from when he had been talking with the servant, Yuder let out a thin breath. Upon that, Kishiar squinted his eyebrows and smiled.

"That's good. It's only been a day and a half, but there was quite an interesting incident during that time. I've been looking forward to telling you when you woke up. Do you want to hear about it?"

His assumption that he would talk about his manifestation and heat period was pleasantly off the mark. Watching Kishiar talk about Lenore's letter nonchalantly, Yuder thought that perhaps his words were a form of consideration in their own way.

"Yes."

"The letter from Lenore Shand Apeto, the one you gave me. Did you read its contents?"

"No."

Yuder remembered the letter from Lenore he had handed to Kishiar, gathering his last ounce of strength before losing consciousness.

Inside, there was a pledge of allegiance written by Lenore Shand Apeto to the person he referred to as 'Your Highness'. After hearing words so compelling that he was willing to abandon his family and his father, he had promised to meet 'Your Highness' in person and seemed to have attended the party that day. If misfortune hadn't befallen him, he would have met 'Your Highness' and fulfilled his purpose.

Any remaining vestiges of fever disappeared completely at his words. With his mind having been in a daze, feeling a sudden sense of clarity, Yuder carefully opened his mouth.

"So… you're saying the letter merely referred to the recipient as 'Your Highness'?"

"That's right."

Various thoughts quickly moved within Yuder's mind. All the things he had seen and heard on the day of Lenore's death and the situations before and after were scrambled together, before neatly lining up under a single conclusion a moment later.

Kishiar watched Yuder’s eyes, which had regained their sharp gleam, with interest.

“That’s bold and clever.”

“What do you mean?”

“I suspected that they might send someone from His Highness the Crown Prince’s side to search Lenore’s body after his death in an attempt to conceal evidence, but after hearing the contents, it may have been for a different purpose.”

“Such as?”

Kishiar replied lazily to the question.

“Among those who attended the party that day, weren’t the only ones who could be called ‘Your Highness’ the Crown Prince and Commander?”

“That’s right.”

“Lenore, who died, happened to be in a state of deep enmity with us and was about to stand trial as a member of the Apeto family. To pin the suspicion of murder on someone, there couldn’t be a more plausible person than you, Commander.”

However, from the perspective of knowing that Kishiar was not the culprit, there was in fact no reason for him to kill Lenore. What he wanted wasn’t to overpower and kill his opponents easily, but to judge them under the law with clear justification and undeniable evidence.

At this point, where the elder priest Beltrail had gone mad, Lenore Shand Apeto was practically the most important person to prove the guilt of the Apeto family, so why would he kill him?

“To those who don’t know better, that letter would serve as great evidence for them to recklessly guess that Commander lured and killed Lenore to send a warning to the nobles, including the Apeto family.”

It was likely that Prince Katchian was banking on this point, had Lenore write such a letter on purpose, and then killed him. He probably also calculated the chance to form an alliance with Aishes, who would benefit from Lenore’s death, or the Duke of Apeto, who could breathe a sigh of relief from the disgrace of his family.

‘And then he probably sent a subordinate to check if the letter was written as promised. If it wasn’t written properly, he could simply annihilate it; if it was, he could release it at the right time.’

Even if Lenore hadn’t written the letter properly, as long as the poison that he drank was known to have been meant for Prince Katchian, the prince wouldn’t suffer any substantial loss.

How many in the world could guess that the prince had made such a bold move alone, risking his own life, unbeknownst to the Diarca family? If Yuder hadn’t captured Kiolle and extracted information, he might not have been completely sure.

In his previous life, Katchian had never once opposed Duke Diarca until he ascended to the Emperor’s throne. Hence, people speculated that, even after his ascension, Duke Diarca was the real Emperor, and Katchian was merely a puppet who followed his orders.

Therefore, Yuder believed that Katchian would not easily move independently, leaving Duke Diarca behind, until he became the Emperor. However, the outcome was unexpected.

Such a bold and flashy method, attempting to drag the opponent down while putting himself in danger, was quite different from the

cautious and prudent Duke Diarca. It was also considerably different from the older Emperor Katchian that Yuder remembered.

In his previous life, Emperor Katchian was an extremely careful person who cared more than anyone else about maintaining his position. As the bloodline of the previous imperial family had ended and he had ascended to the throne, he was sensitive to external recognition, paid considerable attention to state affairs, and skillfully pacified and collaborated with the nobles. However, he was relentless if he ever suspected someone of coveting his position.

Yuder knew of his suspicious and stubborn nature, as he himself was often used as a tool of punishment when the Emperor suspected someone of treason.

The decisive reason Katchian had Yuder kill Kishiar in his previous life was due to the suspicion of Duke Peletta's rebellion, which had been bubbling beneath the surface throughout the first year of his reign.

'There might be a difference between those who ascended to the Emperor's throne and those who did not. Or perhaps he felt a much greater threat from the events that took place during this festival than I had anticipated.'

He felt fortunate to have intercepted Lenore's letter as he thought about it. Yuder wrapped up his musings with a final comment.

"I presume he would've wanted to expose the letter, attributing it to the Commander after confirming whether it contains any elements related to His Highness, the Crown Prince. It's fortunate that I found it first."

"Well, I'm sorry to say this when you called it fortunate, but actually, I returned that letter to the Crown Prince that day."

Kishiar replied with a slightly apologetic expression.

“What?”

“I wanted to understand the intentions of the Crown Prince more accurately to respond accordingly. I returned it pretending that I found it on the second floor through a servant. He immediately publicized the letter in front of everyone. Thanks to that, the first trial of the Apeto family ended in chaos before both parties could present their positions.”

“What?”

Kishiar’s eyes narrowed at the repeated questioning in disbelief.

“I also have the second letter of Lenore Shand Apeto, which Gakane Bolunwald found on the day of the party. Its content is much more interesting than the first letter you found. You could say that this is the main topic of today’s conversation.”

Kishiar playfully shook a small letter that he had kept hidden in his hand.

“Do you want to read it? It’s going to be so entertaining that it will make you forget your pain. I guarantee it.”

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Yuder hesitated, then nodded. At that moment, a blue aura flowed from Kishiar's hand, wrapping around the letter and causing it to float gently before setting it down onto his lap.

"…What did you just do?"

"It's a levitation spell stored in this ring."

As he mentioned it, Yuder noticed a ring on Kishiar's right middle finger he had not seen before. He wondered just how many magical items Kishiar possessed. With that lingering curiosity, he picked up the letter.

"There's… writing on both sides."

"Indeed. The front is written by the sender to Lenore Shand Apeto, and the back is written by Lenore herself."

Yuder began reading the front. The elegant, yet somewhat ambiguous handwriting wasn't too lengthy.

Lenore Shand Apeto, in response to the wisdom I saw in your letter yesterday regarding our country and future, I raised my cup of fluaville tea. They say the special fragrance of fluaville comes from its triumph over the harshest of environments, blooming only after a great struggle. Despite the multitude of flowers and fruits each year, is there anything as courageous as the fluaville that has thrived on a barren mountain, devoid of sunlight, rain, and fertile soil?

In you, who trusted me and made bold decisions even in difficult circumstances, I feel the spirit of the fluaville. I believe your cooperation will bring a hopeful future for me as well. The day when we will be together is eagerly anticipated.

P.S. Return this letter and hand-deliver your next response so I may believe in you as clearly as the rising sun.

The letter, using the fluaville tea, a flower that thrives in the black rocky mountain where no other plant could grow, as a metaphor, was complimenting Lenore for her decision to cooperate. After reading the postscript, Yuder flipped the letter over to reveal a completely different handwriting crammed on the back.

To my naive younger brother, Revlin Shand Apeto.

This letter was another one written by Lenore, this time to his brother Revlin. Ignoring the parts filled with resentment towards Revlin, the remaining content was short, but it was easy to see why Kishiar found it intriguing.

Just as you have made a new choice, I too plan to move along a different path. The previous letter was sent to me by someone from the Palace of Bright. This person reached out his hand, telling me the truth when I was ignorant of the situation outside. I can guess that the reason why this person, who no longer needed the help of others, chose me was because he was trying to face Duke Peletta in the trial using me as his proxy.

I will seize this opportunity and claim Apeto for myself. If that happens, wouldn't it be brotherly love not to include you? By now, you must regret your foolish choice, so upon receiving this letter, I hope you reflect deeply.

While Prince Katchian left no clues to identify himself in the letter he wrote, Lenore wrote the name of the Palace of Bright where the Crown Prince lived on the back as if mocking it.

"He asked to send the letter back, but Lenore managed to sneakily leave this behind."

“Perhaps he thought ahead, preparing for a scenario where the conversation with the Crown Prince didn’t go well. He planned to extract information about me and the Cavalry from Revlin if things went according to plan.”

Kishiar informed him that before his death, Lenore had secretly entrusted the letter to a servant, instructing him to deliver it to Revlin should anything happen to him.

“Fortunately, the Gakane Bolunwald had agreed to meet with him, guaranteeing his safety and pledging to deliver his letter on his behalf. Notably, Revlin had already made it clear that I was free to use this letter as I pleased.”

“Then why did you not disclose this second letter immediately? If you had revealed it before today’s trial, wouldn’t we have avoided a scandal?”

“I discovered a somewhat troubling substance while examining the letter.”

Kishiar raised his hand, pointing towards the letter.

“During the examination of the two letters, I noticed fine dust adhered to their surfaces. It seemed as though it had dried up, perhaps originally having been a liquid. The second letter had more of this dust, and I suspected it was not ink but something else. Despite much of the dust being lost, the remaining amount did not reveal its nature. However, I can’t help but suspect that it smells of foul play.”

Upon hearing this, Yuder looked down at the letter once more.

“Thus, my plan was to reveal it once I’d confirmed the identity of this dust, at a time when suspicions and doubts about me had peaked and the Crown Prince had made his move.”

Yuder knew the identity of the unpleasant substance Kishiar was talking about. It was a poison that induced intense thirst.

‘I didn’t get the chance to report it because of the chaos, but he’s already figured it out.’

The fact that Kishiar, who had no foreknowledge and was dealing with the situation blindly, managed not to overlook such a small detail made Yuder realize his brilliance once more. Kishiar tilted his head, seeming to have noticed Yuder’s nuanced expression.

“You seem puzzled. I thought you’d find it intriguing. Do you have any guess?”

“Yes. I failed to mention it earlier, but when I found the body of Prince Lenore, I discovered the same substance all over his body and belongings. It’s a poison I’m already familiar with.”

“Poison?”

“It’s not lethal, but when absorbed in large amounts through the skin, it causes severe thirst.”

“How were you able to identify such a minute substance at a glance?”

“The poison reacts to fire. When I ignited a flame to examine the prince’s body in the warehouse, I noticed its glow and response.”

In truth, Yuder had confirmed it after suspecting Katchian upon witnessing Lenore’s death as he suffered from extreme thirst and drank poison from a cup. Yet, Yuder calmly lied.

“That’s an unusual poison, even for me to hear about. Impressive.”

“It’s understandable you wouldn’t know. The ingredient is a non-edible mushroom, only used among the poor to induce vomiting by forcing excessive water consumption.”

Yuder had learned this fact in his past life during a conversation with Enon. During the period when this poison was commonly used, he’d asked Enon, who ran a herbal medicine shop and may have known something, after hearing that the raw material was a certain kind of mushroom. It was trivial information he’d obtained.

“It seems you know it quite well. Surely you…”

Facing Kishiar, who seemed to misunderstand something and furrowed his brows, Yuder firmly shook his head.

“I have never used it personally. I just happened to learn about it while living in the mountains. I never imagined I’d encounter it in this manner again”

“That’s a relief. If you had learned of it because you were ill enough to need it, my heart would have ached even more for the miserable state of this empire.”

With a faint smile, Kishiar changed his expression, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

“Anyway, we obtained unexpected valuable information, which will ease our investigation. We need to secure evidence and a trace of how the Crown Prince obtained and used that poison. It would be proof that Lenore Shand Apeto was systematically murdered by drinking the poisoned cup.”

“Yes.”

“It’s fortunate that Lenore Shand Apeto’s funeral is tomorrow, isn’t it?”

Since the corpse bearing evidence and his belongings would still be there, Kishiar smiled as brightly as the sunlight.

It was indeed better than the exhausted, emaciated face he had in his dream. Yuder also, unknowingly drawn by that smile, lifted the corners of his mouth faintly. For a moment, an odd silence danced between their laughter.

“…Why are you…?”

“Excuse me?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

Kishiar, who had inadvertently moved his lips to say something, quickly changed the subject.

“…So, now that the intriguing story has ended, let’s hear your story.”

“Ah, yes.”

When he responded with the feeling that what was bound to come had come, Kishiar also turned his gaze with a much more serious expression than before.

“I didn’t ask before because the situation was urgent, but how did you happen to meet Kiolle da Diarca that day?”

“…Kiolle da Diarca, you say?”

He paused in silence at this unexpected question before questioning back, at which point Kishiar nodded.

“He said he came to help because he was in your debt, but I’m not sure how much you know about the situation at that time, so I wanted to confirm. While you were laid up, I’ve been looking into his

activities, and other than the strange rumor that you two seemed oddly entangled that day, I couldn't find anything else."

"… "

Although it was slightly embarrassing, he did have a hunch about that rumor. It seemed the soldiers who had witnessed him asking Kiolle for information had spread some strange stories.

Yuder sighed and began to speak.

"You needn't worry. I bumped into Kiolle da Diarca that day, and he followed me without my knowledge and saw me manifest. Still, he won't go around spreading what he saw that day."

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

If asked, Yuder had planned to talk about the oath he made with Kiolle. But after hearing this, Kishiar simply stared at him with his red eyes for a moment before giving a single nod, not inquiring further.

"I see. It seems you're confident about it, so I'll leave that matter to you and not worry further. He's not worth the time and thought."

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It was an evaluation that would have driven Kiolle himself to rage, yet as Yuder agreed with the assessment, he merely responded, “Yes. Don’t worry about it,” in a brief reply. Kishiar’s face cracked into a fleeting smile again, though Yuder couldn’t fathom what was amusing about his answer.

“Good. Hearing that response makes me feel like you’ve truly recovered, just as usual. Just this morning, your condition was so bad that I even thought we might have our first case of someone’s life being endangered by the manifestation of the second gender.”

“…Are you talking about me?”

Yuder could hardly comprehend Kishiar’s words, as he remembered nothing of what happened while he was unconscious, and in terms of time, it was only a day and a half. When Yuder awkwardly asked back, Kishiar looked at him as if he couldn’t believe it.

“Yes. Perhaps because the manifestation happened in such a short time, the pain seemed tremendous. It was so severe that even when your heat overlapped, causing your temperature and scent to escalate, there was absolutely no response to the touch of the caregivers.”

“I don’t remember any of it.”

“That’s probably for the best for you. I tried to help by giving you fever reducers and painkillers several times, but it seemed to have no effect. In the end, we even made you consume ground Fonesa powder.”

Fonesa was a medicinal herb with potent analgesic properties that was only used for patients suffering extreme pain. The fact that they had gone to the lengths of feeding him this herb, which was difficult to obtain due to strict cultivation restrictions by Imperial law, indicated how severe his condition must have been. Yuder lowered his head, a sense of shock settling over him.

“I apologize for causing you concern.”

“You don’t need to apologize for being ill. If anything, I am the one who wants to apologize.”

“For what, Commander?”

Caught off guard by his response, Yuder looked up to see a slightly bitter expression on Kishiar’s face.

“I was aware that you, in the middle of your manifestation, were wary of and frightened by me, an Alpha Awakener. But I pretended not to notice and brought you here anyway, because of the situation.”

He was prepared to reply that he had no regrets if Kishiar apologized for sending him on a mission alone, as it was his duty. However, his mind went blank at the unexpected response.

“Commander. That…”

What he felt towards the Alpha Awakener was not so much wariness and fear, but fragments of emotions stemming from memories of his past life. But how could he explain this? No. Come to think of it, since these were memories related to the past Kishiar, it was understandable that the man in front of him felt this way. As Yuder struggled to continue speaking, Kishiar spoke again, his tone gentle yet firm.

“You don’t have to answer. It’s a fact that I was less cautious than usual. I was just worried that my contact with you might have adversely affected your manifestation.”

“That’s… probably not the case.”

“We can’t be sure. Even though it’s our own bodies, there’s still so much we don’t know.”

With a thoughtful look in his eyes, Kishiar replied and then took a deep breath, swallowing whatever else he had intended to say.

“Anyway, it’s truly a relief that your fever has subsided and you’ve awoken safely. You can rest here today, and we plan to move to the Cavalry tomorrow. Will that be okay?”

“Can’t we just leave today?”

Yuder, remembering his intention to tell Kishiar that he wished to return immediately upon seeing him, cautiously counter-questioned.

The response came immediately.

“Others would have been sick for days, but you managed to get through it all in one day. Now, you want to leave without resting. Remember, we only have one body and health, so you should take care of it when you can.”

“But.”

“Didn’t you promise not to act recklessly last time?”

“…”

With those words, Kishiar, who had sealed Yuder’s mouth, rose from his seat with a smile.

“Resting one more day won’t make the world crumble. You don’t need to worry about Lenore Shand Apeto’s funeral. Rest here quietly today, and even after you go back, take another three days to rest.”

“Commander.”

“It’s an order, Yuder Aile.”

His protestations lost their power at those words. Yuder read the worry reflected in Kishiar’s red eyes, sensing the enormous energy that enveloped his body.

How could he insist further after seeing that look in his eyes?

“I understand….”

“Be good, rest well. Later on, I’ll give you a reward, so don’t be too upset.”

He wasn’t a child, what reward was he talking about? He was about to reply that he didn’t need it, but Kishiar was faster, already rising from his seat.

“I guess I’ll have to go out again. You must be tired since you just woke up, so rest. If you need help, ask the attendants.”

Kishiar turned to leave immediately after he finished speaking but then twisted his body back as if he had discovered something.

“Ah, I see there are still two walls closed. It should be okay to remove them now.”

Realizing that Kishiar was referring to the walls, Yuder, who had been curious about the isolation walls since hearing about them from the attendant, hesitated before asking a brief question.

“But why were those walls put up in the first place?”

“They’re barriers that completely separate and isolate a space, so whatever happens inside doesn’t affect the outside. Your condition during the manifestation wasn’t good, so I ordered the walls to be put up just in case.”

Kishiar readily answered. The answer was clear, but there were still lingering questions. Perhaps noticing Yuder’s subtle change in expression, Kishiar turned his body.

“You’re curious why such a thing is installed here?”

“I can’t deny it.”

“Actually, those walls aren’t installed only here. They’re also in a few other palaces within the Imperial Palace. They’ve been installed since a long time ago, and all have the same purpose. They’re to prevent overflowing power from leaking out, to block and contain it.”

Kishiar, who briefly answered, quietly stared at the still-closed two isolation walls.

“I had no idea.”

“It’s normal to be ignorant. In fact, the very existence of these walls is a secret.”

“Is it alright to show such a thing to me?”

“Well, if I can’t trust my assistant who risked his life for me, who else can I trust?”

Kishiar responded lightly, an inexplicable self-mocking smile flitting across his eyes.

“Besides, even if you were to tell the outside world about the existence of such walls, no one would find that information particularly interesting. Anyway, it’s… just a wall.”

Just a wall. It was the right phrase but somehow left a peculiar aftertaste.

Yuder hesitated for a moment before slowly opening his mouth.

“So that overflowing power is….”

“You can probably guess, but isn’t my ability exceptionally outstanding?”

If anyone else had made such a claim, it would have been dismissed as a mere cocky joke, but coming from Kishiar, it wasn’t a laughing matter. The one who possessed the divine sword, a priest-level divine power, and on top of that, the abilities of an Awakener if he wasn’t extraordinary, then who could be? With a smile, Kishiar nonchalantly praised himself and continued speaking.

“However, regardless of how innate abilities may seem commendable, during childhood, due to incomplete control abilities, one might inadvertently cause accidents, just like novice mages often make mistakes.”

It was a well-known fact, often depicted in all kinds of fairy tales and legends, that novice mages who had just learned magic caused many accidents due to their clumsy control.

“So, that wall was for my sake and for the sake of others. It was the best choice. It was a friend of my childhood in its own way.”

Kishiar, smiling and looking at the wall, turned around and left his final words.

“Now, let’s truly rest for a bit. The scent seems to be fading, so when you wake up, it should be completely gone.”

“Yes, understood”

Yuder, who was about to respond absent-mindedly, suddenly paused in surprise, raising his head.

‘Wait Scent?’

He hastily looked around, but Kishiar had already left. Only the slightly askew empty chair was left, substituting for the traces of the person who had just been sitting there.

He was fast. Yuder, blankly staring at the empty chair, suddenly realized that it was in a perfect position to allow him to leave the room immediately after he got up.

‘Come to think of it…..’

It seemed that the strategic setup was not just about the chair’s position.

On reflection, even though he was worried that Yuder’s manifestation might be distorted due to his contact, was there a need for Kishiar to hand over the letter by levitation magic from such a distance? Until the moment Kishiar left, he never approached closer while sitting in that chair.

Yuder raised his arm and sniffed his scent. But just like how one can hardly perceive their own body odor, it was difficult to discern the remaining scent of a second gender manifestor.

However, considering Kishiar’s actions, there was only one guess he could make.

‘So, the scent really did remain…’

In his previous life, Yuder was known as a half-Omega who had neither scent nor heat. Perhaps it was because he didn’t have a scent, but he hardly ever felt or was influenced by the scents of other

second-gender manifestors. Of course, he was well aware that not all second-gender manifestors were like him.

If Yuder had a scent left, it would have been quite stimulating to Kishiar, an Alpha Awakener, yet his complexion didn’t change in the slightest. It was an astounding ability.

Yuder stared at his palm and slowly clenched it into a fist.

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His heart was roiling with a tumultuous mix of emotions. Relief that the event he had most dreaded from his past life didn't repeat itself; anxiety as he constantly calculated and weighed whether manifesting as an Omega with a scent was truly better than before; and fatigue from a body still running a slight fever. These emotions stirred into a complex blend within him.

However, when all these thoughts were pushed aside, there was one lingering residue.

The conversation he had with Kishiar during the pain of manifestation, the patience and consideration he had shown, and the unwavering smile he held till the end.

'If I were the Commander when this happened, could I have acted the same way?'

No, he couldn't have. They were too heavy burdens for one person to bear for a single member. Yet, these were the tasks that Kishiar accomplished without a hitch for Yuder. Yuder sighed deeply and closed his eyes.

There was nothing as futile as attributing meaning to each action of another. Yet, how could he not?

Separate from his resolve to do his best for Kishiar and the Cavalry after his return, he had set up a few walls in his heart to maintain an objective view of situations.

However, he eventually came to realize, far too late, that all the walls he had built were completely perforated. It was terribly disappointing, but strangely, it wasn't unpleasant.

The problem was that it was quite the opposite.

‘If I didn’t feel any pull after experiencing all this, that would be weirder.’

No matter how faint one’s expression of emotion might be, being human, there are moments when one is seized by an emotion so massive it cannot be controlled. This was one of those moments.

‘…Now that I think about it, I felt something like this before.’

An emotion that had been buried in the darkness after the accident caused by the manifestation. Yuder realized the name of the sensation that had returned after 11 years.

It was the blind fascination he felt when looking at the back of a shining being.

—

The Harvest Festival abruptly ended with a murder at the special award ceremony party on the last day, which left a stench of blood in the air.

Who was the one that invited Lenore Shand Apeto to the party by sending a letter that day, and who killed him? Who was the one who tried to poison the Crown Prince’s drink and what did they want? Many speculated secretly and loudly about these questions.

Even more suspicion arose when the servant who had dropped the Crown Prince’s glass was found murdered without anyone noticing, to the point that it overshadowed the trial of the Apeto family by half.

Most people who took interest in the matter speculated that the Emperor was behind it all and that the executor was his brother,

Duke Kishiar La Orr. The late-discovered letter of Lenore fueled that speculation.

If the Emperor really put Kishiar in the front to target the Crown Prince and the four great dukes, would they just sit by and let it happen? The Emperor, who until now had appeared to acknowledge the Crown Prince's existence without any friction, though perhaps only superficially, suddenly stirred up such a situation. The nobles carefully watched the movements on both sides, wondering what his intentions were and how the situation would evolve.

"His Majesty certainly would not have wanted to adopt a successor from the Diarca family. Weren't there many rumors of foul play from that family during the selection of the Crown Prince a few years ago? Although His Highness is still young and blameless, the Diarca family has been too audacious recently."

"I've heard about it too. Rumor has it that the Emperor would have preferred to choose someone from the Herne Ducal House, the Empress's family. Wasn't the candidate put forth by them suddenly died after being confirmed?"

"Was it only the candidate from the Herne family? Virtually all the other candidates who emerged at that time took a bad path."

"Even so, it's surprising. I wonder if His Majesty's health is finally improving."

Within the temple, filled more with whispers of curiosity than voices of mourning for the deceased, the funeral of Lenore Shand Apeto was about to begin.

It was a meager temple, far too modest for the scion of a renowned Ducal House, but there was no one truly grieving as most of the attendees were there only to observe an interesting situation.

Lenore’s father, Duke Apeto, refused to attend for the reason that he did not want to open the doors of his closed family due to such a disgraceful event, and only Lenore’s elder brother, the first prince, Aishes, sat with the relaxed face of a leisurely winner, enjoying the attention of those who came to flatter him.

Those observing them exchanged glances, hiding their mouths beneath their black veils, and made all sorts of speculation.

“Come to think of it, isn’t the third son, his younger half-brother, not coming at all?”

“It wouldn’t be strange if he didn’t come, since he was entrusted to Duke Peletta. It’s a pity. I wanted to see his reaction and what he would say.”

“That’s quite something too. If it’s true that Duke Peletta has caused trouble, the third son would be shaking hands with the one who pushed his own brother to a dead end, wouldn’t he?”

“That would make a great scandal. Then again, that might be what’s noble about it.”

“But when is the funeral supposed to start? It’s already much later than when the coffin would have come at other times.”

The same thought arose in the minds of others at a question suddenly blurted out by someone who had been chatting for a while.

“Indeed. When was it supposed to start? Noon, wasn’t it?”

“Right. It’s been a long time already. This is ridiculous. I had somewhere to go after the ceremony. If it gets any later, I’ll just have to leave.”

As the murmuring grew louder, Prince Aishes called a servant and ordered him to bring the priests in charge of the funeral. But the

servant, who disappeared for a moment, reappeared with a pale face and dropped a piece of shocking news.

“I apologize, my lord! The coffin, on its way here, has reportedly encountered Prince Revlin and Duke Peletta and is currently at a standstill.”

“What?”

A flash of anger and surprise crossed the frail-looking face of Aishes.

“What are you talking about? Revlin and Duke Peletta?”

“That is.”

As the servant hesitated, unable to continue, Aishes, frustrated, rose from his seat.

“Enough. I’ll have to check it myself. Lead the way.”

As Aishes hastily exited, the guests, who had been watching each other, also quietly rose from their seats and began to follow him. No one wanted to miss such a stimulating and excellent spectacle.

Aishes, advancing down the long corridor outside the temple, soon discovered two groups of people sharply confronting each other. He quickened his pace towards them.

“What on earth is happening?”

“This is Prince Aishes Shand Apeto!”

As Aishes’s servant loudly announced his identity, the attention of those quarreling finally focused on them. On one side were laborers and priests carrying a black coffin, and on the other were a few

individuals dressed in Cavalry uniforms and a remarkably tall and handsome man who stood out even from a distance.

Aishes recognized him straightaway as Duke Kishiar La Orr of Peletta, and he furrowed his brow. He had previously sent a letter to Duke Peletta offering assistance to contain Lenore. Now that Lenore was dead, the proposal had become unnecessary, yet the awkwardness could not be helped, knowing that fact.

“So, you are the first prince. This is the first time I’ve seen your face so close.”

“…Yes, indeed. But what is all this about? My deceased brother’s funeral has not yet taken place because of your interruption. If you don’t provide a satisfactory answer, you will have to take full responsibility for this disrespectful action.”

“I couldn’t help it, you see. Regrettably, it was only this morning that I learned how the poor soul in that coffin might have died, so I rushed over here. Despite my request to take a quick look, they insist they absolutely cannot open the lid. What else could I do?”

“Excuse me?”

The reason Lenore had died.

“My brother died from drinking from a poisoned cup. You were there as well, if I recall correctly?”

Aishes retorted, trying not to show his confusion, maintaining a cautious demeanor.

“I thought so. Until a letter sent by Lenore Shand Apeto before his death reached Revlin, your youngest brother and also the one who had been a temporary member who greatly assisted me.”

“…A letter?”

“I can’t disclose the details at the moment as the investigation is ongoing. Since you are here, won’t you allow me to open that coffin for a moment? If you do, I assure you, you will see that I didn’t come here in vain.”

As Kishiar smiled, the Cavalry member standing around him looked defiantly at the laborers carrying the coffin.

‘Is it true? Or is this a bold political show staged because he’s being accused of luring and killing Lenore? What should I do?’

The right course of action would normally be to halt the funeral and suggest they go somewhere private to talk, but Kishiar was already putting the Apeto family on trial even without that. Aishes did not want to risk incurring his father’s wrath by being seen dealing with Kishiar alone at such a sensitive time.

However, then he noticed the commotion caused by the crowd of onlookers gathering behind them. Hearing their noisy chatter, which would usually have irritated him, finally calmed his startled heart.

‘Right. It would be difficult for him to put on a sham or a bluff in front of so many watchful eyes. It’s none of my business to defend the honor of the dead, I have no choice but to wrap things up here.’

“…I understand. It is not something I can ignore as you have come with information that could potentially reveal a new cause of death for my departed brother. I grant permission to open the coffin for a moment.”

“Prince!”

One of the priests who was acquainted with Aishes cried out with a grim look on his face, but Aishes avoided his gaze.

“Put the coffin down!”

In the end, in the midst of the temple, under the curious gazes of the crowd, the unprecedented event of a coffin being opened occurred.

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Chapter 170

Originally, it was a tradition in the imperial aristocracy's funerals to momentarily open the coffin before the ceremony ended, allowing the family to bid their final farewell to the deceased and place flowers.

Unless the deceased's body was damaged beyond repair, this was always observed. Therefore, the body of Lenore that was revealed within the opened coffin appeared as if he was merely sleeping, perfectly restored to an undamaged state.

'It seems there's nothing wrong with it at all.'

'What can he possibly find out from that?'

Kishiar nonchalantly scanned Lenore's body, unaffected by the numerous suspicious glances cast in his direction. After a moment, he turned his head and signaled to a burly member of his group standing closest to him, issuing an order.

"Devran Hartude. It's your turn."

"Understood. Leave it to me."

"Wa…Wait! What are you doing!"

Without hesitation, the Cavalry member known as Devran strode forward, igniting a large flame above his palm. He brought it dangerously close to the body in the coffin, heedless of the priest's protest.

"Hu-huh. What the!"

A commotion erupted, marked by panicked screams and gasps from all corners. One thought swirled in everyone's mind.

'Duke Peletta has brazenly come to burn the body…!'

'Was it all a lie about discovering a new clue, about receiving a previously unknown letter?'

"What the hell are you!"

Even Aishes, who had permitted the opening of the coffin, cried out in shock. Kishiar, however, remained unfazed, a steady smile on his face.

"Just as I thought, it's still there."

"What?"

Startled by his calm voice, those in attendance turned their heads back and cautiously focused their attention on one spot. The large flame conjured by Devran remained still, right in front of the body.

"Devran. Do you see it?"

"Yes. I see it. Just as you said, Commander."

As Devran murmured excitedly, Aishes, who had been leaning on a servant for support, barely managed to steady himself.

"Duke Peletta. What are you doing? You tried to set the coffin on fire without a word. Do you understand the consequences of such an act?"

"Well, that's unfortunate phrasing. We've done no harm to the body of Lenore Shand Apeto. The flame was only necessary to reveal evidence still present. Now that what I wanted to confirm has been revealed, why don't you come closer and see?"

Aishes, perplexed by his remarks, gathered strength in his legs while he heard the murmurs of the confused spectators behind him. While his heart was strained, he did not want to show his weakness in front of others.

“Support me to that spot.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Aishes had planned to rebuke Kishiar’s rudeness loudly if he saw nothing unusual about Lenore’s body. But when he stood right next to the Cavalry member that conjured the fire, he felt as if his heart, which had just started beating again, was once more on the verge of stopping, and he gasped in shock.

“This… What is this?”

“Do you see it?”

“What in the world… the light….”

The corpse of Lenore, which had seemed clean, was glowing under the flame in an eerie color. As if there were invisible stains under the skin, it was chilling.

“That is exactly the evidence I wanted to confirm. It is proof that the deceased had first absorbed another poison before drinking the poison that led to death.”

“Another… poison?”

“A poison made by grinding a mushroom called Dudureli. Have you heard of it?”

He hadn’t. As Aishes responded with a blank expression to the name he heard for the first time, Kishiar explained it kindly.

“It is mainly dissolved in water or absorbed through the skin in powder form. After being absorbed, it leaves traces on the skin for a few days until the poison completely fades, and those traces can only be seen under fire. The effect is rather mild, just inducing severe thirst, but I suppose that wasn’t sufficient for what they wanted.”

Severe thirst. Aishes realized what Kishiar was trying to say.

“Do you mean to say that someone made Lenore absorb that poison and then led him to drink the poison cup?”

“That’s right. The deceased likely absorbed it without knowing anything. Normally, he would have had to drink a lot of water and would have been fine after a bit of suffering, but it seems that the unfavorable surroundings led to this outcome.”

Aishes quickly noticed that the glowing stains on Lenore’s corpse were most concentrated on his neck, chest, and the hand he’d brought together. Looking at the stains glowing more intensely under the pale bluish discolored fingers and fingernails, he felt dizzy again.

“But still… how can I believe you without reservation, given what people are saying about the Duke at the moment?”

“Ah, the rumor that I summoned Lenore Shand Apeto and made him drink from the poison cup.”

At such a blatant remark, the surprised onlookers buzzed. Aishes bit his lip and kept silent for a while before opening his mouth.

“That’s correct.”

“I see. You might think that even revealing the nature of this poison now could be part of the plan. I understand that this cannot be definitive proof of my innocence. But.”

With the word “but”, Kishiar, who had crossed his arms, turned his head towards the back.

“Didn’t I mention it earlier? Your youngest brother received a letter. Revlin, come out and show it.”

“…Revlin?”

Behind Kishiar, who had a strong presence like the sun, a small boy who had been hidden among the exceptionally tall and large members stepped forward with a stiff expression. He was accompanied by another boy standing protectively next to him.

“It’s been a long time, brother.”

Only then did Aishes recall the servant’s words when he first rushed in, that Revlin and Duke Peletta had arrived together, and he scowled. Instead of looking ill, the face of his youngest brother, who had regained his health since becoming an Awakener, was resolute. Seeing this made Aishes, who only remembered the timid Revlin who couldn’t speak properly and always looked frightened, quite nervous.

“So, Revlin, what is this thing you want to show?”

“It is a letter that our late brother Lenore sent to me. Before he went to the party that day, just before entering the palace, he entrusted this letter to a servant, instructing them to bring it to me in case anything happened.”

Revlin carefully took out a letter from his pocket and held it up for all to see.

“I swear to God, this letter was indeed written by Brother Lenore himself. Through this letter, I discovered who Brother Lenore was going to meet that day, and thought I should let the Commander know. The Commander, after realizing the poison that was present

on the letter I gave him, conducted an investigation himself. Thanks to that, we were able to quickly understand the truth."

The truth was, Kishiar, who had obtained the letter through Gakane, had first confirmed its content. Then, he informed Revlin and they planned this course of action together. Although this dialogue was pre-arranged, no one had any suspicions.

From the start, Revlin showed no interest in any letter written by Lenore. Half of what Lenore wrote was nonsense, and the other half was about his ill-advised choices. If the pathetic letter served to vindicate Kishiar in some way, then it was fortunate.

The sole reason for Revlin's attendance at Lenore's funeral, a place he initially had no intention of attending, and for participating in this charade was a request from Kishiar, who had kept his promise to save his lover.

"…So, I heard that the servant who was supposed to perform duties on the day Lenore died ran away and never returned. Looks like he brought the letter to you."

Aishes, like everyone else, had no doubt about Revlin's words. He cast a fleeting glance at the nobles who were watching them in silence from behind, then let out a brief sigh.

"Alright. So what's this truth? Is it written in there who invited Lenore to the party that day?"

"Yes."

The voice of the beautifully doll-like boy echoed heavily enough for everyone to hear.

"The person who called Brother Lenore to that place that day, who cunningly orchestrated the events by even smearing poison on the letter to him, is now in the Bright Palace."

“…”

When one hears such shocking news, they become speechless. The chatter among the crowd abruptly ended, even the temple personnel who were unable to hide their anger, and even Aishes, who everyone thought wouldn’t be surprised by Revlin’s words, fell into silence for a moment.

After a long pause, it was Aishes who broke the silence first.

“Do you… understand what you’re saying right now? Even a single mistake could lead to more than your downfall. You know what you’re saying, don’t you?”

“I’ve merely mentioned the fact written in Brother Lenore’s letter.”

There was no way that could be true. Why would the Crown Prince do such a thing? There was no particularly close relationship or resentment between him and Lenore, and he had no reason to contact the Apeto family, who were about to face trial. Furthermore, the Crown Prince was the one who almost drank the poison that day, and above all, he had the illustrious backing of the Diarca Duchy.

The notion that Revlin, the obedient, doll-like boy, was asserting the real culprit who lured Lenore was the Crown Prince - a figure who had never once stepped ahead of the Duke of Diarca since his selection as Crown Prince - was utterly incomprehensible.

It sounded as if he was practically launching a direct attack on the entire Diarca family. The implications were bound to be perceived as highly controversial.

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Chapter 171

‘Of all times, why did this have to happen when so many were listening?’

Once everyone had heard Revlin’s words, the situation was spiraling out of control. Aishes’ mind was busy, regret gnawing at him for having allowed Revlin to speak so freely.

‘As if it weren’t bad enough, we are in the midst of coordinating discreet alliances with other families before the trial. Things will get troublesome if the Diarca family hears about this.’

But if Revlin’s words were true, that posed an even bigger problem.

‘That…would mean war in a different sense.’

For Aishes himself, it didn’t matter much who had killed Lenore, his loathed competitor. He was almost grateful that it could speed up his family’s control over the situation. However, the family’s perspective was different.

The Four Great Duke Families, having a shared history of opposing the Emperor for a long time to prevent his power from growing too strong, weren’t as close as they used to be after the selection of the Crown Prince. Seeing the Diarca family becoming increasingly arrogant after their victory, the other three Duke families, including Apeto, began to feel uneasy.

Its commonplace for yesterday’s ally to become today’s enemy. The present was calm, but what about after Prince Katchian ascends to the throne? Was there any guarantee that the Diarca family would not attempt to break the wings of the other families?

Over the last few years, the Apeto family had been sending people to the East, where the Diarca family was strong, to gauge the atmosphere and recruit young nobles. This was also influenced by their heightened caution.

Aishes had seen Duke Apeto worry about the situation after Katchian's selection several times. If Duke Apeto had been present, he would have believed Revlin's words without questioning their authenticity.

A few incidents caused by the family being exposed during the trial and shaking things up were tolerable. Aishes hadn't interfered in this matter, so once he had dealt with his father and his faction and become the Duke, the problems could be quickly rectified.

However, if the one who killed Lenore wasn't the Emperor's side, but the Diarca family, the story changed. What he needed most before he could rectify the family he would inherit were alliances with other families that could protect him, and time. But what if the Diarca family, carrying the Crown Prince on their back, planned to attack the weakened Apeto family? Could they defend themselves?

There was only one conclusion in Aishes' mind, already considering the Apeto family as his own. If Revlin's words were true, the Apeto family could not easily overlook this situation.

Engrossed in his thoughts, Aishes failed to notice that his inner turmoil was plainly visible to Kishiar.

'As expected, he can't even consider the possibility that Prince Katchian might have acted alone in this matter.'

Had Prince Katchian already revealed his solo action and attempted to make contact, Aishes would undoubtedly have reacted differently. Fortunately, the Prince hadn't done so, and Kishiar had managed to take advantage of the situation and use the card he had just obtained.

All that remained was to witness the result.

“Very well. Then I must examine this letter myself.”

Revlin handed over the letter just as Aishes finished his deliberation, as if expecting his response.

“You indeed should. Although the poison that soaked the letter has mostly dissipated, you should be careful, given your frail health.”

At Revlin’s words, Aishes flinched, and then hastily unfolded the letter. All eyes turned towards his fingertips. Onlookers in the back, eager for a glimpse of the letter Aishes was reading, lost all dignity as they strained for a better view.

And a moment later, Aishes Shand Apeto, having read both sides of the letter, opened his mouth so that all could hear, his face unnervingly expressionless.

“…It seems we cannot proceed with the planned funeral today. My apologies to those who have attended. We will contact you again from the family home in due course.”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“Has the Crown Prince truly…? Then what about the Diarca Dukedom…?”

Aishes ignored the exclamations from the temple staff and the curious questions from the nobles, and glanced at the body still lying open in the casket.

“Return this casket and transport it to the Apeto family home.”

“You mean the Apeto family home, not the temple?”

“Yes. Understand that any further questioning would make your mouth and ears useless ornaments, which can be done without.”

“Yes, yes! Understood.”

The frightened workers and servants quickly closed the lid of the casket containing Lenore’s body and formed a procession. Before handing back the letter, Aishes, who remained behind, shot a piercing glare at Revlin for quite a while.

“…You should have immediately contacted me or the family as soon as you received this letter, Revlin. Thanks to you, things will become much noisier.”

“Why should I have done that?”

“Why should you? No matter where you’ve entrusted your body, ultimately you’re a person of the Apeto family. Knowing the current situation of the family and still holding yourself there, don’t you feel ashamed? You’re certainly not becoming a real Cavalry member.”

At Aishes’s question, Revlin burst out laughing.

“Shame. Do you know, brother? This is the first time since my birth that we’ve had such a lengthy conversation.”

“What of it.”

Hearing Aishes’ sharp response, Revlin looked around as if to show off. It hadn’t been long since he’d left the Apeto family and entrusted himself to the Cavalry, but it was enough to understand the place.

During this time, Revlin had ventured outside freely for the first time and mingled with people while eating. He was taught to avoid eye contact with the rough and dirty commoners, but those he met were incredibly kind.

Even members like Devran, who had a hard time due to the Apeto family, were slightly gruff at first, but after knowing what Revlin

had done, they softened and remained silent. It was a complete contrast to the family members who would beat their servants to death over the slightest indiscretion and thought it would be better if a child like Revlin died quickly.

Nion, his lover, had often said that compared to the Apeto family, this place was like heaven. Every time Revlin saw his relieved face, he was thankful many times over that his decision to send a messenger to Yuder that day was not wrong.

“I’ve never felt like I was a part of Apeto. But now, this place feels right. Even if I can’t become an official Cavalry member, I have no intention of going back, so just assume I’ve died.”

“What?”

Aishes was taken aback by his younger brother’s statement. He didn’t know what Duke Peletta had done to the child, but his mind seemed to be firmly set.

“Ha. I see. So, you liked being with those filthy commoners. If being called a traitor pleases you, I won’t stop you.”

“Thank you.”

Aishes trembled at the corners of his eyes at Revlin’s calm gratitude, but he quickly turned around. The person who stopped him as he was about to leave without even a proper farewell was Kishiar, who was smiling merrily.

“Well. I thought a conversation between brothers who haven’t met in a while would be longer, are you already leaving?”

“Thank you for your consideration, but I have a lot to do when I get back.”

“What a pity. After receiving the message you sent a while ago, I was looking forward to meeting someone who could view the injustices happening within the family with such impartial eyes.”

At Kishiar’s insinuating gaze, Aishes unknowingly twitched his eyelids.

“That is I don’t think this is the place to discuss such matters under the current circumstances.”

Aishes bit his lip slightly as he remembered the contents of the letter he had sent to Kishiar. Kishiar laughed and waved his hand.

“Oh, I see. I apologize. Nevertheless, I will not forget my gratitude for your clear judgment today, which allowed me to quickly get out of the unpleasant rumors I’ve been suffering from. Feel free to contact me again. I’m still greatly interested in what you sent me.”

””

“Visiting the Cavalry and having a conversation might be good, too. You never know, right? Your heart might feel at ease like Revlin’s and it could be beneficial for your health.”

Upon hearing the word ‘health’, Aishes reacted visibly. Seeing this, Kishiar laughed with a casual expression. Aishes was an ambitious man who held the future of the Apeto family. However, even he, bold enough to contemplate toppling his father, seemed to find it difficult to maintain his composure in the face of his health weakness. After seeing the healthy glow of Revlin’s face, one wonders if he knew how obsessively his gaze was burning.

If he hadn’t seen it, he wouldn’t know, but now that he had, he wouldn’t be able to hold out for long.

“I… understand.”

Watching the retreating back of Aishes, who was offering a semblance of a farewell, Kishiar felt that it was time for him to leave as well.

“Now, shall we also return? Everyone has worked hard.”

“Not at all!”

“We’re happy that you brought us along!”

The Cavalry members, led by Revlin, shouted in unison, their eyes shining brightly.

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Chapter 172

After watching the Cavalry return to their carriages, Kishiar boarded another one he had stationed elsewhere. He was not heading for the Cavalry barracks, but rather towards the imperial palace. As the carriage, enchanted to eliminate jostling, quietly journeyed, he tirelessly calculated the ramifications of the events he had set in motion that day and their potential outcomes.

Today, he had used Aishes Shand Apeto to sow seeds of suspicion and discord in various places. If those seeds took root properly, the sharp criticisms once hurled at Kishiar would now be directed squarely at the Crown Prince and the Diarca family, leading the Apeto family to lose complete trust in not just the Crown Prince but also the Diarcas.

He had also deliberately exploited Revlin to provoke Aishes's vulnerabilities, insinuating interest in a message he had previously sent. Even if Aishes' thoughts had momentarily shifted due to Lenore's death, in the end, he was bound to seek Kishiar again.

Capturing a closely-knit prey was challenging, but it was much easier to catch each prey one by one when they distrusted each other and scattered. Kishiar had no doubt that the seeds he had sown would soon sprout without harm.

'If I could also shake the relationship between the Duke of Diarca and the Crown Prince a bit more, I couldn't ask for more.'

Considering the Duke of Diarca's temperament, it was highly likely he was already attempting to strengthen his grip on the Crown Prince following these events. But would a young beast, having tasted the thrill of hunting for itself after enduring long patience, return obediently to its cage?

‘That’s unlikely.’

The relationship between the Duke of Diarca and Crown Prince Katchian, as seen through Kishiar’s eyes, was more complex than it appeared on the surface and was tightly knitted, making it challenging to find an entry point. There were times when he wondered if he could ever create a rift between them, but now that Katchian had grown to be almost of age, an opportunity had finally come.

Kishiar lightly chuckled, regretting that he couldn’t witness the Duke of Diarca’s flabbergasted expression in person due to the sequence of events initiated by the Crown Prince.

—

“What in the world are we supposed to do about this, at the funeral of the Apeto, no less!”

On his return from his duty at the Imperial Knight, Kiolle halted in the corridor, hearing a voice echoing ominously. The voice originated from the stone exhibition hall, a place the Duke of Diarca usually kept off-limits even to his family members.

“Is Father in there now?”

“Yes, he is.”

“Who is he talking with?”

“Baron Durmand. He arrived about an hour ago.”

Baron Durmand was a distant relative of the Diarca family and one of the influential nobles from their faction. Kiolle had frequently encountered him since childhood. After the servants bowed and retreated, Kiolle furrowed his brow, watching the entrance of the

exhibition hall intently. Although no voices could be heard from inside anymore, the brief exchange he had heard was troubling him.

‘The funeral of the Apeto.’

Lenore Shand Apeto. Kiolle had heard about his funeral scheduled for that day. Although he didn’t attend and therefore was unaware of what had transpired, it was clear from the Duke of Diarca’s fury that something unusual must have happened.

‘Could it possibly be related to… him again?’

An unusual event? Involuntarily, he remembered the black-haired Cavalry member he had met at the party the day Lenore died. On that day, Kiolle had secretly searched Lenore’s body with that Cavalry member, and had even dared to confront the Duke of Peletta alone because of a vow to help him.

Fortunately, despite the spiteful prattle of his third brother, the Duke of Diarca was more concerned about the Crown Prince’s impulsive behavior than the misdeeds of his youngest son. Thus, the matter had not been problematic and was eventually forgotten, but Kiolle still felt an uncomfortable lingering sensation.

He should have returned to his room and shut off his nerves. Despite the voice of reason pounding in his head, he found it hard to make his feet move.

“Huff. Hey. It’s time to return. Summon my carriage and tell my attendant to come. Oh, and my throat is dry. Get me half a glass of Benug juice….”

At that moment, Baron Durmand, who was slowly walking out from inside the exhibit hall, was giving instructions to his servant. Then he turned his head and found Kiolle.

“Huh? Isn’t that Kiolle? It’s been a while.”

“Baron Durmand.”

When Kiolle called his name, a smile rose on the baron’s aged face, which looked like an old rat.

“Oh, yes. Seeing you in your armor, did you just get back from your knight duties?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent, truly excellent. You remind me of the Duke in his youth.”

A typical noble offspring would have shown gratitude for the compliment, but Kiolle did not respond to such flattery. Instead, he wrinkled his nose and slightly turned his head towards the inside of the exhibit hall where Durmand had come out. He did not sense the Duke of Diarca inside. As always, when he was angry or feeling dizzy, it seemed he had gone deep inside to look at the magic stones he had collected for decades.

“I actually heard my father’s voice as I was passing by just now. What happened?”

“Ah, about that….”

Baron Durmand, accustomed to Kiolle’s cold demeanor, opened his mouth with a bitter smile, then sighed deeply.

“You know about Lenore Apeto’s funeral today, right?”

“Yes.”

“I had someone attend. The ceremony was not even held, and it ended up being a fiasco.”

“A fiasco… you mean.”

“It seems the Duke of Peletta and the third child of the Apeto family caused a major disturbance just before the coffin was brought in.”

It was indeed related to the Duke of Peletta. Kiolle’s eyebrows twitched as his ominous hunch seemed to be somewhat accurate.

“A major disturbance, what happened?”

Baron Durmand seemed to hesitate for a moment about how much he should tell, but soon he sighed and lowered his voice.

“The Duke of Peletta claimed that someone else was responsible for Lenore Apeto’s death. He presented a new letter that the deceased had supposedly sent to his younger brother as evidence, and he even opened the coffin in front of everyone and showed new traces of poison that hadn’t been discovered before. Truly astonishing.”

“The fault of someone else means….”

“Who else would there be but the one in the Palace of Bright?”

It was a fact known to all of the Diarca family that the real murderer of Lenore was the Crown Prince. The Duke of Diarca was shocked and horrified by the Crown Prince’s actions, which had taken place without consultation. However, if this incident could perfectly frame the Duke of Peletta, it wouldn’t be a bad outcome. Thus, he had reluctantly decided to pretend he knew nothing about it.

However, today, all those plans had been utterly distorted. Baron Durmand, whose head ached merely at the thought of how much the many attendees of the funeral would chatter, clicked his tongue and firmly pressed the emerald jewel on his finger ring against his temple. He always wore such a ring due to his chronic migraine.

“We really got ourselves into a fine mess. I never imagined that they would have a second letter on their side. The Crown Prince was greatly surprised to hear the news too, but we’re the ones left blindsided without doing anything.”

“Did the Apeto believe the Duke of Peletta’s claim?”

“If they hadn’t believed, wouldn’t they have proceeded with the funeral instead of halting it? They even moved the coffin containing the body from the temple to the Apeto main house.”

“…”

“Hoo, I bet the Duke also has a lot on his mind. Why would the Crown Prince, who had been patiently doing well so far, suddenly step forward and cause such a ruckus?”

“My lord! The carriage has arrived. We’ve prepared everything as per your instructions.”

“Ah, right. I’ll be there soon.”

Upon responding to the servant’s voice that appeared just in time, Baron Durmand patted Kiolle’s shoulder and delivered his last words.

“Nevertheless, there’s no need to worry. The Duke always has an answer ready. Let’s meet again next time.”

With that, he hunched his shoulders, tightly grasping his luxurious ruby cane, and hurriedly disappeared. Kiolle watched the baron’s retreating figure, as if he was running away, before moving his steps. He headed not toward the exhibition hall where the Duke of Diarca was, but toward his bedroom upstairs.

‘The newly discovered traces of poison… they must be what that guy showed when he conjured up fire close to the body.’

The dark-haired Cavalry member had referred to the glow from Lenore's body as an unidentified poison. It was clear that he had informed the Duke of Peletta and orchestrated today's event.

'Damn it. The proof of the oath didn't disappear, so that guy didn't die that day. But why did I get so surprised and panic? I did something stupid. I feel like I've done something wrong to my father for no reason.'

He had tried to bury all the events of that day due to the shock and discomfort, but it shouldn't have been so. Kiolle felt an uncomfortable feeling as if he had betrayed his father and the Diarca family while the servants helped him remove his armor.

'That damned guy.'

His name was definitely Yuder Aile. He had boldly suggested that person come to the Diarca family, but the face that refused without a second thought still made his fist clench.

'I should have left him alone back then!'

Because of that cursed guy, Kiolle hadn't been able to vent his anger at his servants for months. Whenever he tried to curse, he would involuntarily feel drowsy due to the effects of the oath, startling him and causing him to back off.

When dealing with his subordinates or fellow knights, his discomfort grew as he remembered the nonsense that man spouted. Strangely enough, the more he distanced himself from others, the more friendly others became, which he didn't appreciate.

Unaware that this was because his reputation, which had hit rock bottom, was gradually rising among others, Kiolle gritted his teeth at Yuder.

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Chapter 173

At the very moment that Kiolle was grinding his teeth, Yuder Aile was strolling through the imperial gardens behind the palace, feeling somewhat uneasy.

His body had fully recovered, just like before, after another day of rest. Even the slight fever that accompanied his heat period had completely subsided.

Still, Yuder couldn’t leave the palace. He had been instructed to wait until Kishiar, who had left to attend Lenore’s funeral, returned. Despite his regained health, he found it stifling to spend all his time in his room. Somehow perceiving his discomfort, an elderly servant suggested a walk through the garden.

“In this season, the imperial palace garden blooms with more flowers than at any other time of year. Even for us, who spend every day here, the sight is beautiful enough to stop us in our tracks. Touring the garden will help pass the time swiftly.”

He appreciated the kindness, but the servant’s insistence on following him in case he got lost seemed overly protective. No one, not even an imperial family member, would want a palace servant trailing behind him. After repeatedly promising not to wander too far off, he finally managed to shake him off.

‘But that was not the only excessive thing.’

His breakfast that morning had been followed by a dessert tower on a three-tiered golden platter that filled him with astonishment. Even in his past life, when he had lived as a Cavalry Commander with countless lands and treasures, he had never seen such an extravagant dessert.

Recalling the tower he had painstakingly demolished over an hour, Yuder moved past the beautifully tended flower beds and stopped in front of an unfamiliar pond. A few fish, their fins fluttering like flower petals, swarmed towards him as if they mistook him for someone bringing food, but soon dispersed when he gave them nothing.

The scenery was beautifully serene, completely disconnected from all the happenings outside. Looking down at the flowers floating lazily and peacefully on the pond, Yuder was lost in thoughts that were entirely at odds with the peaceful surroundings.

‘By now, Kishiar must be at Lenore’s funeral.’

He couldn’t help but feel regret for not being able to accompany him, merely imagining what might be happening there, and who might have been brought along. Kishiar would have shaken his head, admonishing him for not taking his advice to rest, but changing a lifetime of habits was a difficult task.

Walking past the pond and a little further, he saw vines spiraling around a beautifully carved pillar-shaped sculpture. Even atop the vine, a few yellow flowers had bloomed, suggesting that the servant’s claim about flowers blooming everywhere in the palace during this season was no exaggeration.

In his previous life, despite frequenting the palace so often, he never knew when the flowers bloomed most abundantly or that there were sculptures and vines in these places. He reached out and briefly touched the pillar, the sensation noticeably duller. This was due to the new gloves Kishiar had delivered through the servants, which were made of a thicker material than before.

Yet, his heart felt considerably at ease, dressed as usual in his black uniform and black gloves. It was indeed fortunate that Kishiar had delivered the gloves and uniform before leaving.

“Only an empire would leave such artworks, coated with gold and silver just to highlight the flowers, exposed to the elements in the garden,” he mused.

When Yuder was about to leave and move elsewhere, a stranger’s voice unexpectedly rang out from behind. Turning his head, he found a man, whose arrival time he could not discern, leaning against a pillar with his arms crossed.

“Don’t you think the same?”

Yuder’s gaze was drawn to the man’s long silver hair, shining like a honed blade. If a commoner were to tie their hair in such a long length, they would likely come off as weak. Yet, this man appeared neither frail nor soft. A refreshing smile brushed over his sharp face, reminiscent of a weapon tempered multiple times.

Only then did Yuder slowly open his mouth to respond.

“… I’m not sure.”

“Really? I thought you felt the same, seeing the displeasure on your face as you touched it.”

The man gradually approached.

“I’ve seen that black uniform recently. You’re a member of the Cavalry, aren’t you? Created by the Duke of Peletta.”

“Yes.”

“I am an envoy from the Kingdom of Nelarn.”

The man introduced himself as such, but Yuder already knew his name.

‘The second prince of Nelarn. Ejain Afnan Nelarn.’

A prince now, but a man who would surpass his brothers to become a king. And within a year, one of the most famous individuals in the entire continent, having become an Awakener.

In his previous life, Yuder had met him several times as an imperial envoy and as the sole Awakener striving to resolve a global crisis. Amidst the tumultuous times, there were few rulers who managed and led their nation and people as well as King Ejain. It was no exaggeration to say that Emperor Katchian, whose nerves sharpened due to the ever-weakening Empire, was wary of Nelarn swallowing him up, but at least until Yuder's death, that never happened.

But the reason Yuder remembered Ejain wasn't just because of that. For reasons unknown, Ejain seemed to like Yuder quite a bit, and he had proposed multiple times for Yuder to visit Nelarn. Despite Yuder's constant refusals, the last proposal from King Ejain arrived when Yuder was imprisoned.

'The Empire has abandoned you. Why can't you let them go? Come to Nelarn. The King says that Commander Yudrain is not the type to die like this.'

However, Yuder ultimately rejected that proposal too. That marked the end of their correspondence.

Ejain had also attended the party a few days ago where Lenore had died, so Yuder had seen him from a distance. Yuder was surprised to learn that he was here as an envoy from Nelarn at this time, but after that, he didn't pay any attention. He certainly didn't expect to meet him here.

"So, you came from Nelarn."

As Yuder responded slowly, as if hearing it for the first time, Ejain nodded.

“Yes. I was taking a walk just now. I wanted to personally experience the famed beauty of the Imperial Garden before the festival ended and I returned.”

“You’re walking without a single servant following you?”

“Well, the thing is, I got lost halfway. It’s so vast that I ended up not knowing the way back as I kept walking.”

His response was so cheerful that it didn’t feel serious at all. Not knowing how to respond, Yuder kept his mouth shut and finally managed to cautiously ask a question.

“Shall I call a servant to guide you out?”

“No, it’s okay. Rather, would you care to chat for a moment? I’m quite interested in what your Cavalry has accomplished during this festival.”

In Ejain’s eyes was an unfamiliar color Yuder had never seen in the empire. It was said that the Nelarn royal lineage was famous for inheriting eyes the color of lilac blossoms. A piece of information that Yuder had just barely memorized before his previous life as an emissary resurfaced in his mind.

“I don’t know much about it…”

“You joke quite well. A Cavalry member who can wander around the palace alone can’t be ignorant.”

“…”

With a single word, Ejain pierced Yuder’s defenses and then broke into a hearty laugh.

“You don’t need to be so stiff. It’s just a simple curiosity.”

It seemed that he was not going to let Yuder go easily. The only way left was to finish the conversation quickly and get away.

“Understood… Please go ahead.”

“Is it true that all of the over 300 members of your Cavalry are Awakeners?”

“Yes.”

“Then you must be an Awakener too. What power do you possess? It’s impossible to tell the power of an Awakener just by looking.”

“I can… use a bit of elemental magic.”

“Elemental magic! Even a little is quite impressive.”

“It’s not that impressive.”

“Can you show it to me? I’ve never seen an Awakener’s power in front of my eyes.”

Yuder hesitated for a moment and then shook his head.

“I’m sorry, but that’s difficult.”

“That’s too bad.”

Fortunately, Ejain did not press any further. His demeanor was much lighter than Yuder remembered, yet he was as straightforward as ever. He continued to ask Yuder about various well-known rumors about the Awakener, eliciting answers and then bursting into laughter each time.

“Fascinating. You really don’t have to pay any price when you use your power. It would be nice if I could have that kind of power.”

“Didn’t you just say that the perception of the Awakeners in Nelarn isn’t good?”

In the Empire, where Kishiar and the Cavalry were based, many people also feared the Awakeners, let alone abroad. Knowing this, his words were surprising, despite knowing about the future where Ejain would truly become an Awakener.

“It’s not. But would that stop me from wanting the power?”

Ejain laughed heartily as he responded.

“Having something is always better than not having it. The only ones who wouldn’t agree are those who already have.”

Though it seemed like a joke, it strangely sounded serious. As Yuder was trying to decipher the hidden meaning in his words, Ejain suddenly spoke as if he had remembered something.

“Ah, right. Have you seen that then?”

“What are you talking about?”

“The thing that turned you into an Awakener. The Red Stone that fell from the sky. I heard it fell somewhere in the middle of the Empire…”

Just then, from not too far away, the sound of someone running out of breath and shouting could be heard.

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Chapter 174

Yuder was relieved that he didn’t have to answer the awkward question. A youth wearing the traditional attire of the Nelarn Kingdom stopped in front of Ejain, panting heavily.

“Goodness! Do you know how long I’ve been looking for you? Where on earth are you going without a word! Especially when such a significant event has just occurred, why do you always choose such times Prince…!”

“Melbon, Melbon. Can’t you see the person next to me?”

“Eh?”

The young man, who had been about to pour out his words, finally noticed Yuder standing next to Ejain and quickly closed his mouth, surprised.

“My, my apologies.”

“You never learn to pay attention to your surroundings when you’re excited, no matter how many times you’re told.”

Ejain scratched his head while glancing at Yuder with a wry expression.

“Well, I wasn’t intending to hide my identity, but I ended up having to. Although, since I am an envoy, I didn’t lie.”

Ejain grumbled, explaining that it was hard to have a casual conversation once his prince status was known, and looked at Yuder, who showed no particular reaction, in wonderment.

“But… aren’t you surprised after learning who I am?”

“No, I was surprised.”

“That doesn’t look like a surprised face.”

“I apologize, but this is my surprised face.”

“Did you know who I was from the beginning?”

“Truly, I did not.”

Ejain’s pupils subtly narrowed as he looked at Yuder, who insisted calmly. His gaze was either amused or dispassionately observant.

“Um, Your Highness… We don’t have time to delay…”

“Alright, I got it. I’m going, so stop nagging.”

A young man, standing nervously by Ejain’s side in the tense silence, spoke cautiously. Ejain, who had chided him lightly, turned towards Yuder.

“We’ve had the most enjoyable conversation since I arrived in the empire, and since it’s all due to you, may I know your name?”

Yuder hesitated for a moment, but then replied.

“It’s Yuder Aile.”

“Yuder Aile.”

Ejain repeated Yuder’s name and wore a satisfied expression.

“I’ll remember that. I hope we’ll meet again soon so we can continue our unfinished discussion about the Awakeners.”

Unfinished conversation, indeed. Would they ever meet again in this lifetime to continue such a talk? Even if Ejain were to become a

King again, as in his previous life, it would be incredibly difficult to meet again as long as Yuder remained an ordinary Cavalry member.

Yuder watched the retreating figures of Prince Ejain and his party, who soon disappeared into the distance, then turned away.

He had intended just a brief stroll but meeting Ejain had caused a considerable delay. As he retraced his steps, trying to find a shortcut, Yuder started to wonder about the report the prince's subordinate was about to deliver.

'Has something happened in Nelarn? Or… was he about to report on an incident within the Empire?'

There was one thing he could guess about the Empire. It might be related to the fact that Kishiar and the Cavalry had gone to Lenore's funeral today. The thought made him eager to return and check.

"Where have you been? If you were any later, we were going to start searching for you."

The servant who welcomed the hurriedly returning Yuder sighed in relief and relayed the news that Kishiar had already arrived.

"I cannot imagine how worried the Duke must have been."

"Yes, I was quite worried. When I finished my tasks quickly and returned, there was no one waiting for me."

"Duke."

The servant, startled by the leisurely voice from behind, turned around with a start. Yuder courteously bowed his head in greeting toward Kishiar who had silently been leaning against the wall.

“I’m sorry, I lost track of time while out for a brief walk. I apologize for causing concern.”

“Your well-being is more important than the worry you’ve caused. Are you alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

Only then did Kishiar remove himself from the wall and stride over. An immense energy that Yuder hadn’t felt before his disappearance still enshrouded him, but unlike a few days prior, it didn’t feel threatening. Kishiar too seemed to be sizing up Yuder, eventually nodding his head.

“Good. I can tell you’re not lying.”

“Then I can return to the Cavalry now?”

“Actually, even if you do go back, you’ll have to rest for three more days. Are you so eager to return?”

“Yes.”

At his firm response, Kishiar let out a small laugh.

“Alright then. You can go straight back.”

After thanking the servant who had cared for Yuder over the past few days, Kishiar confidently strode toward the back of the palace. Upon boarding the waiting carriage, Yuder felt a weight lift off his shoulders, realizing he could finally return to the Cavalry.

As he watched the carriage leave the palace through the window, Yuder quickly asked the question he had been most curious about all day.

“Did you manage to successfully complete all the tasks you had today?”

“You would have found out soon enough. Were you that curious?”

“Yes.”

“I’m more curious about what you saw during your long walk. Isn’t that more interesting?”

His words sounded absurd, but Kishiar’s smiling face did not waver. Yuder blinked for a moment, then cautiously replied.

“…Nothing much really.”

“Same for me.”

“Do I have to share?”

“Of course not, if you don’t want to. Same goes for me.”

It seemed like a joke, but Kishiar didn’t appear to be backing down.

‘Really, nothing happened…’

Was he suspecting that Yuder was hiding something? Suddenly that thought seemed plausible, and Yuder started to struggle to recall his day.

What did he see when he was out today? Nothing but flowers came to mind. Even that was becoming increasingly vague because, compared to the handsome man in front of him, the flowers seemed insignificant. After a moment of thought, Yuder awkwardly opened his mouth.

“I saw… flowers.”

“Flowers?”

“Yes.”

“Well, it is the blooming season. Anything else?”

“I saw some fish briefly.”

“Fish… Oh, there was a pond nearby.”

Kishiar, who had nodded, asked again, “Anything else?”

“While looking at a sculpture that resembled a pillar… I had a brief conversation with someone who was lost.”

“Someone who was lost?”

“It was an envoy from Nelarn. Turned out, he was actually the Second Prince. We ended up having a long conversation because he was so curious about the Awakeners.”

This answer seemed to surprise Kishiar, who then broke into laughter.

“Now that is indeed interesting.”

“I didn’t find it so.”

What joy would there be in answering something you already know? Even during his conversation with Prince Ejain, the only thing occupying Yuder’s mind was curiosity about what might have happened at Lenore’s funeral where Kishiar had gone.

“I’ve told you all that I saw. Now, it’s your turn to answer.”

“What I did, it’s just as you would expect. There were no surprising variables.”

Only then did Kishiar leisurely open his mouth to speak. Yuder attentively listened to the events of the day as they flowed from his lips, exhaling deeply when he heard that Aishes Shand Apeto had disrupted the funeral.

‘Impressive. The gap between the Apeto family, the Diarca family, and Crown Prince Katchian will surely widen due to this incident. The next trial should proceed more smoothly without any disruption.’

Although he achieved his goal simply and surely and returned, his extremely calm demeanor was because he was already considering his next targets without satisfaction. Who could guess his true intentions from his outwardly playful demeanor, where all these calculations were hidden?

Sensing that Yuder’s mind had also become busy, Kishiar quietly spoke.

“Yuder. No matter how much you want to work, you can’t for the next three days.”

“…I understand.”

“And when you return, don’t go straight to your quarters. Make a stop at the medical division first.”

“The medical division… you say?”

At these unexpected words, Yuder turned his head, and Kishiar’s red eyes sparkled playfully.

“The bodies of the Awakeners are indeed different from ordinary people, so I’ve long felt the need to establish a dedicated medical division for research from the ground up. Originally, I was planning to set it up later, but I decided it would be better to start, even if imperfect, and gradually improve it, so I accelerated the plan.”

In his previous life, there was no medical division until Kishiar retired. It could only be established when the number of members increased several folds and there were many Awakeners with healing abilities, and it took quite a long time to operate it properly

due to the interference from those who were discontent with the Cavalry.

“We’ve secured beds in the empty space and brought in a doctor and pharmacist, even a priest. That’s a good start, isn’t it?”

When did he plan and manage to set up a medical division amidst all the busy work, let alone select a doctor and priest? It was hard to believe, but there was no way Kishiar would lie about such a thing, so it must be true.

“You’ll be the first member to use the medical division. As a trial sample, I expect you to experience it with utmost sincerity and provide your feedback.”

“…Understood.”

He was flustered by the unbelievable fact that all these things were accomplished in just the day and a half he had spent unconscious from manifestation and the day he took to rest. Kishiar, stroking his chin and smiling, watched Yuder respond.

“But before that.”

“Yes?”

“Now that you’re fully recovered, shouldn’t you heal the spot on the back of your hand? I can take care of that, let’s finish it before we go back.”

Come, take off your glove. His voice, feigning solemnity yet carrying a hint of laughter, caused Yuder’s fingertips to tremble.

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Chapter 175

Why could it be? Although I've done this countless times, there seems to be something different this time around.

As Yuder slowly pushed off the much thicker gloves than what he used to wear, he had the feeling as if he was undressing in front of Kishiar.

The gentle ambiance that had filled the carriage while they talked about walks and funerals had somehow dissipated. The moment his right glove dropped onto his lap from within his fixed gaze, the once taut atmosphere reached its peak.

Kishiar graciously extended his palm upwards. If not for the situation, his movement might have been mistaken as an invitation to dance. But in his other hand, he held a holy emblem and a white purification stone. Yuder glanced at the offered palm, then slowly placed his right hand on top.

That was the moment. When the two hands overlapped, an indescribable tingling sensation spread from his palm throughout his body. As Yuder's hand instinctively began to withdraw, long fingers clamped around it like a trap, stopping the movement.

….

Yuder reflexively glanced at his captured right hand. Objectively, it was a cool temperature, but strangely it felt as hot as fire on his skin.

Manifestation had surely ended, yet why?

Could it be because their eyes, staring at each other, flickered red like blazing flames? Or…

Within the boiling silence, Kishiar slowly parted his well-formed lips.

“Are you afraid?”

“Pardon?”

“I asked if you tried to withdraw out of fear.”

Again, and also this time.

He could, somehow, guess the words that were left unsaid.

“No, it’s not that.”

“Then why did you try to evade it this time? My assistance.”

Yuder inhaled deeply, trying to ease the tension from his stiff right hand. As strength left his hand, Kishiar’s clamping fingers opened like a sprung trap.

“I felt a strange sensation…”

“A strange sensation?”

Kishiar’s gaze calmly studied Yuder’s face. Yuder summoned some strength into his abdomen and murmured quietly,

“It’s been a long time since I’ve been touched barehanded, that’s probably why. Just… really that’s all.”

The gaze that seemed to pierce through his mind finally softened.

“A sensation… a sensation, you say.”

With those words, Kishiars eyes narrowed as they looked at Yuder’s fingers, which had again slightly curled in response.

“Do you still feel it now? That sensation.”

Yuder looked down at the large hand of Kishiar that held his. The shivering sensation had now disappeared, but the paradoxically cold yet hot warmth and the churning in his stomach remained.

“I…I’m not sure.”

Bowing his head, Yuder added cautiously,

“It might… It seems like it.”

“I see, so it might be related to the second gender manifestation.”

Kishiar stared at their overlapped hands with a thoughtful expression, then added his other hand, which held the holy emblem, on top, completely enclosing Yuder’s hand as if it was a shell. Cold sweat began to bead from his completely encased hand.

“And now?”

“No different.”

Only then did Kishiar channel his divine power. White light erupted, and Yuder could feel a slight stinging sensation from his right hand. Before manifestation, even the slightest exertion caused tremendous pain, but now it was merely a tickle.

‘So, it was indeed related somehow.’

Before Yuder could finish his thought, the light faded and Kishiar withdrew the hand he had placed atop. A faint smile surfaced on his face as he examined his now clean hand, save for a tiny purple dot.

“Were you in pain?”

“Yes.”

“The stimulus you felt earlier?”

“It seems… okay now.”

“That’s a relief.”

Kishiar lightly clenched his hand then let go completely. While a sense of relief washed over him, a chill akin to emptiness also set in, causing his shoulders to momentarily shudder.

“Yuder.”

“Yes.”

“It may seem strange to say it myself, but I do care about you quite a lot. You know that, right?”

“…Yes.”

Although Kishiar’s way of caring seemed somewhat dubious, he had silently supported Yuder in all his endeavors, provided physical healing, and even created a position of assistant by his side that couldn’t have existed without trust. There was no denying it. At Yuder’s small nod, a faint smile played on Kishiar’s lips before disappearing again.

“When you manifested, I too experienced some sensations for the first time. It was quite unfamiliar and baffling. It was the first time I decided that I should refrain from deliberately approaching others.”

At his words, Yuders oddly transformed expression made Kishiar’s eyes gleam with curiosity.

“I hope you won’t misunderstand. Its natural to be drawn instinctively since we manifested as different genders, and its also natural to feel unease and caution. Especially considering the uncontrollable impulses that might be inherent in that. But even so,

nothing will change from before. If you wish to remain the same as youve always been.”

“…”

“I will still treat you as my most cherished and beloved assistant.”

Despite Yuders lack of response, Kishiar didnt demand an answer and continued.

“So you understand? What I mean is….”

“I…I understand what you are trying to say.”

Yuder interrupted him.

“Even though I have manifested my second gender, it doesn’t mean I will suddenly be infatuated with those of the opposite gender and see the world turned upside down. Just, simply.”

He looked down at his hand that still seemed to retain the warmth of Kishiar, and mumbled slowly.

“Like you said, because you and I manifested as different genders… it will take a while for us to adjust. That is really all there is to it.”

“I see.”

At last, a warm glow surfaced in Kishiar’s eyes.

“To be honest, even if you weren’t afraid of avoiding me, I wouldn’t feel good about it.”

Kishiar wasnt feeling good - a rare sentiment for him. Yuder was taken aback momentarily, then cautiously asked.

“Is that so?”

“Yes. Perhaps this might also be a repercussion from your second gender manifestation.”

Kishiar murmured, maintaining a silence as if contemplating something.

“I might have to revisit the parts of Beltrail’s research records where he documented the interactions between Alpha and Omega Awakeners.”

“Was there such a part?”

“Do you want me to sift through it and send it over when we get back?”

“Please.”

When Yuder nodded, Kishiar smiled faintly.

“So, even in a situation like this, your inability to contain your curiosity… I rather like that aspect of you.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“Of course it is. What could be a higher compliment than that?”

A playful expression finally surfaced on Kishiar’s face after he said that.

“I’ve been lavishing you with praise, aren’t you planning to return the favor? It’s customary to do so.”

“It’s hard when you demand it out of nowhere, especially when I didn’t ask for it.”

“So, does that mean there’s nothing commendable about me? I’m a bit shocked.”

Despite knowing that wasn't what he meant, he made a show of acting aggrieved. Yuder put his glove back on his completely healed hand. Glancing outside the window, he noticed they were nearing the grounds of the Imperial Knights, where the Cavalry was stationed.

Kishiar, too, looked outside following Yuder and put the now dull purifying stone and the holy emblem back in his pouch. The faint sound of the carriage rumbling on the road filled the silence.

"… I think you're handsome."

Just when they were about to reach their destination, Yuder slowly voiced a thought. Kishiar's bewildered gaze seemed to prick his cheek, but he didn't meet his eyes.

"… What did you say?"

"I often think that you're very handsome."

"I know that but… Wait. Was that your answer to when I asked if there was nothing to compliment about me?"

Really? Was that really it? Kishiar, unable to believe it, questioned multiple times if there were no other compliments, but Yuder remained silent until the carriage stopped in front of their accommodations. Always the one flustered by Kishiar's words, seeing him flustered gave Yuder a certain sense of satisfaction, akin to revenge - a feeling he intended to keep a secret.

"We have arrived."

Before Kishiar could press further, the coachman disembarked from the carriage and courteously opened the door.

Due to the approaching dusk, there was not a soul passing by in front of the Cavalry. The two of them alighted from the carriage and entered the building.

“Follow the hallway on the first floor to the east, and you’ll find the medical division. We’ve put up a sign, so it should be easy to find.”

As if the previous talk of compliments never happened, Kishiar, bearing the demeanor of a Commander again, pointed towards the east and spoke. As Yuder nodded and passed by him, he stopped and turned to look at Kishiar.

“Do you have any more questions? Or if you want me to accompany you, just say it. I’m a Commander who has nothing to offer but good looks, but I can at least do that.”

“Why would you say that? You have other merits as well.”

“Oh? Like what?”

He was a man whom Yuder had always admired and followed since his previous life. If asked to list his merits, Yuder could honestly talk until dawn. However, he simply couldn’t say all those things in front of the man himself.

Unable to voice his inner thoughts, Yuder swallowed and looked up at Kishiar’s pale face.

“The fact that you are the only one who can command me, Commander.”

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Chapter 176

As he spoke, staring directly into Kishiar’s slightly mischievous-looking red eyes, Kishiar’s expression momentarily changed. A laugh slipped out from the confusion reflected in his gaze, as if he wanted to say something but wasn’t sure what.

I will take my leave then.

As he bowed his head and turned away, no response came from Kishiar. But that was okay. His heart was significantly at ease.

Your Grace. Why arent you coming up, just standing there since youve returned?

Ah, Nathan.

After being left behind, Kishiar called out the name of his adjutant who had appeared from the opposite corridor, a smile etched on his face.

What should we do about this?

Pardon?

This is really troublesome. Its been a long time since Ive been pricked like this.

Do you mean you met an enemy on your way here?

Im not sure if it was an enemy or not.

Frowning, Nathan Zuckerman observed his Lord as he muttered something that sounded like a riddle.

I remember you were supposed to return with Sir Aile did you send him on ahead?

Yes. As planned, I sent him to the medical division. He’s on a mandatory vacation for three days.

Finally, a coherent response came from Kishiar. Yet, he soon burst into laughter again, shaking his head. Since he didnt seem upset, Nathan put his worries about his Lord aside and followed him upstairs.

—

After the party, it was known that Yuder Aile had been absent for a few days due to a secret mission assigned by Kishiar. However, he suddenly returned, greatly changed from before.

His colleagues, who had heard the news of Yuders return, were first shocked to learn he was lying in a bed in the newly formed medical division on the east side of the first floor. Then, they were utterly surprised by the news of his manifestation as an Omega.

No way, after the party ended, I did think it was strange that some wall had blocked off an area on the first floor’s east side. But, a medical division?

Devran, who had come to visit the ailing Yuder, shook his head as he looked around at the neatly prepared beds in the surrounding area. Honestly, visiting the sick was an excuse; he was overwhelmingly fascinated by the newly formed area.

Yuder, are you really okay? It was all over in just two days? Theres nothing wrong with your body, right? You’re really okay, right? I was laid up for a week, and honestly, my body still feels a bit sluggish

Standing beside him, Jimmy, on the contrary, couldnt stop worrying about Yuder, with an almost tearful look on his face. The boy, who had recently manifested as an Alpha, shared the pain he had experienced during his manifestation over that week, deeply empathizing with the sudden pain Yuder must have suffered.

Im fine. I'm just here to monitor my condition for three more days, just in case. Even if youre right next to me, I feel fine.

Thats right, Jimmy. Im an Alpha too, and Im here, but Yuder is fine.

Gakane, who had been quietly sitting next to them, intervened. He had been the most surprised at the news of Yuder's manifestation as an Omega, but among those who had come to visit, he had managed to regain his composure fastest. Behind him, his shadow clone was diligently peeling the skin off the fruit he had brought for Yuder. However, it was the Eldore siblings who were excited because Yuder didn't even eat a bite.

"Gakane! I like apples!"

"Gakane! Carve it into the shape of a rabbit for me!"

"Hmm I haven't yet tried such delicate work. I'll practice more. Sorry."

"Gakane, practice more!"

"Even though you lost to us in the last duel!"

Yuder silently exhaled, watching the Eldore siblings nonchalantly stabbing a dagger into Gakane's chest. This tumultuous scene was not the last of its kind. Ever since his return, members constantly swarmed him, so much so that he couldn't remember the last time he had a proper rest.

Aside from those who had just arrived, there were so many visitors that he thought every single one of the 330 members would visit at least once. No, it seemed they already had.

“Ah. It’s time for training again. We have to go.”

Everyone hurriedly got up when Hinn, who had devoured all the fruit carved by Gakane’s shadow clone, suddenly stood up and declared this.

“Already? Time flies.”

“Yuder! We’ll come again later.”

“Yuder. See you later.”

After everyone had rushed out, only a few chairs and a plate piled with fruit peels were left in a messy state. Yuder sighed again and the white curtain hanging next to his bed was pushed aside, revealing a face.

“Those noisy fellows, it seems better to ban them from entering or to feed them laxatives, doesn’t it?”

“I agree in spirit, but we can’t, Master Enon.”

When the young Priest called out from behind him, the guardian of Luma, Enon, scratched his scruffy head and clicked his tongue.

“The basic courtesy when visiting the sick is to be quiet. If they want to visit the medical division that much, they should become patients themselves.”

“But that’s why I said we can’t……”

Yuder recalled the shock he felt when he first entered the medical division upon seeing their faces. He could hardly believe that the green-haired Priest Lusan, who had helped him at the previous

festival, and Enon were part of the medical staff in the Cavalry. While he could understand Lusan, he could never have imagined Enon here, which surprised him to the point of losing his words.

In response to Yuder's question about why he was here, Enon calmly replied that he had come to watch over him. It was even more surprising to find out that he had been selected purely by passing the interviews and tests conducted by the Knights of Peletta and Nathan Zuckerman. On the contrary, Lusan had been promoted to an official priest only a few days after the festival where he had helped Yuder and Revlin, as he had caught the eye of Kishiar.

Despite meeting for the first time, Lusan and Enon got along quite well. Lusan, who was an orphan and was rejected by the senior priest due to his blunt attitude despite his high divine power, quickly followed Enon, who, despite his rough manner of speaking, was surprisingly mature and competent.

When Enon mentioned that he had closed his pharmacy in the capital to come here, Lusan's admiration grew even more. From Yuder's perspective, it was fortunate that neither of them seemed the type to spread stories about the Cavalry elsewhere.

"Yuder. I'm here."

At that moment, Kanna entered the medical division with a bright smile. Yuder turned his gaze away from Enon, who nodded and stepped back.

"Did you come up from the underground?"

"No, I've been talking with 'them' alongside Ever."

When she said 'underground', she referred to Thais Yulman who was studying the Red Stone, and 'them' indicated Nahan's colleagues, the Awakened Brothers Gayle and Doyle from the Star of Nagran.

When Yuder could no longer continue the interrogation due to his symptoms, Kishiar and Kanna assigned the task to Ever instead. Ever, a strong-willed country girl, quickly formed a rapport with them and was said to have provided substantial help in a short amount of time.

“We’ve gleaned more information from their clothes, weapons, and today’s conversation. They said they were feeling cooped up and wanted to go outside, so after consulting the Commander, I allowed them to walk around our property. They seemed pleased.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I can’t help but feel a bit sorry for them. They seem like people who wouldn’t have ended up in such a situation if life hadn’t been so hard.”

Yuder thought that Nahan and the Star of Nagran might sneak in while everyone was away at the party to retrieve them. But nothing like that happened. Did the Star of Nagran intend to abandon Gayle and Doyle so easily? Although not as adept as Jimmy, they were still Awakeners with commendable sword skills. To dispose of them so readily raised doubts about the existence of camaraderie.

After assuming that Gayle and Doyle would not cause significant trouble even if left alone, Kanna summarized the additional information she had gathered.

“The headquarters of the group called the Star of Nagran seems to be scattered across two or three locations. It doesn’t seem to exist only within the Empire… but the resistance is so strong that I still can’t discern the exact locations. And the person referred to as ‘that person’ is definitely from the Empire, not a Southerner. An elder who seems to serve as a spiritual pillar for the moderates like Gayle and Doyle, so it seems they refer to him as a sage.”

“A spiritual pillar…”

“Neither Gayle nor Doyle seem to know exactly what the objective is. But they continue to gather Awakeners, wanting to form a large group, so we can’t just leave them be. Especially Nahan.”

A look of concern appeared on Kanna’s face.

“I’ve only glimpsed the information, but it’s too dangerous. Just as Yuder was attacked without hesitation… Even though Nahan and the Sage are together now, if their conflict continues, it may not last long.”

“Most likely.”

“The Commander seems to be considering employing Gayle and Doyle as Alpha Awakeners, like those brought from Apeto Mansion, if they agree. It hasn’t been asked yet, but hopefully, it will work out.”

Kanna mentioned that Gayle and Doyle seemed to desire a peaceful and stable life more than internal strife. Those who handed them the swords, arguing that since they had combat abilities, they naturally needed to train, were Nahan and his Star of Nagran colleagues.

“But Yuder, did you know? Gayle and Doyle must have had a very strong impression of you. Even though they’ve only seen you twice, your name seems to conjure a terrifying and enormous image of a demon in their minds.”

“…Me?”

“Yes. It made conversation easier, though. I told Ever as well, and she found it amusing.”

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That he had become something like a big demon was beyond his imagination. However, seeing Kanna's joy, he thought it might not be so bad after all. She added a few more words about Gayle and Doyle before swiftly moving on to the next topic.

"Actually, this is the main point, but the conversation got a bit lengthy. Yuder, yesterday Yulman said he finished all the preparations. He stayed alone after the festival and experimented with the materials, which, surprisingly, seems to have gone exceptionally well.

The Elder Mage of the Pearl Tower, Thais Yulman, had been preparing to transfer the power of the Red Stone into another medium like a magic tool, then dissect the now-empty stone shell and its divided power. Given the preparation, which involved casting several layers of protection around the stone and procuring expensive materials from Kisiar, it seemed about time for a result.

"Really?"

"Yes. He said there would be no problem transferring the power as long as the preparations were properly done, and that he would proceed with the task tonight. The Commander will be attending, and I'll be going too. Yuder, can you… join us?

"I will definitely go."

There was no reason to keep lying in bed, as his body was fully recovered. If it hadn't been for the Cavalry members who kept visiting, he would have already gone out to do something.

"That's a relief."

With a happy smile, Kanna told him about the progress of the special training she had been leading. There were many members who were thirsty for a method to further develop their power, not only Gakane and Kanna. Recently, there were always people at the training ground, even late into the night, who gathered voluntarily to train.

“Since everyone has different powers, just thinking together about how to train to become stronger feels helpful. I worry if we’re doing it right, though”

Yuder felt a warm sensation rising within him as he looked at Kanna’s twinkling face. In his past life, he had never had these conversations with comrades, thus he had never felt this way before. He wondered if things would have been different if he had had the chance before. A twinge of regret crept in.

“Oh, did I talk too much? You must have been tired from dealing with the manifestation. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

Yuder replied tersely, then added, worried that his response might have come off as cold.

“There’s no better way to develop than to enjoy training. Thanks to your help during the party, I was able to finish the task much more easily. You’re doing great, so don’t worry.”

“Do you really think so?”

Kanna’s lips curled into a smile that reached her ears.

“I feel invigorated. Thank you, Yuder.”

Looking at her now, he couldn’t find the stony-faced girl who stood in line for the entrance exam a few months ago. Whether due

to the increased sense of responsibility from managing the Cavalry or serving as Deputy, her eyes were now heavier, yet they radiated clear trust and warm friendship towards Yuder.

“Oh, right. If you have time, would you like to train with us? Everyone would be really happy if you could join, even if it’s not as much as you helped Gakane and me.”

“I’ll do it.”

“Really?”

Kanna looked surprised, her mouth agape at the certainty in Yuder’s response.

“I already have the authority to modify the training schedule for the entire team from the Commander… and there are some things I wanted to teach.”

“A training plan? Oh my! I can’t wait. We have to tell the others!”

It was a bit doubtful whether they’d still look forward to it after the training changed to something hellish, but Kanna seemed resilient enough. Yuder watched as Kanna, excited, ran outside, promising to meet in the evening. He mentally added attending tonight’s experiment to his schedule.

“It’s time for your medicine. Take it.”

Not long after Kanna left, Enon opened the curtain, offering a bowl with a grave face. Yuder sighed lightly as he stared at the ominously shimmering liquid, then he gulped it down.

“We’ve put in herbs good for energy replenishment, but the taste is truly terrible. How can you drink it so well without even a word of complaint? I thought Enon was making poison at first. Maybe it’s because you two have known each other from the start?”

Lusan, who had been watching from afar, laughed with a fascinated expression. From a brief exchange between Yuder and Enon when Lusan first arrived in the medical division, Lusan guessed that they must have been close. Since they had indeed known each other before, Enon didn't bother correcting the misunderstanding.

"Stop chattering, kid. If you have time to watch, go do more tidying up. Have you finished what you were doing earlier?"

"Ah… No, I seem to have forgotten."

After Lusan hurriedly disappeared deeper into the medical division, Enon quietly looked down at Yuder. When he offered the bowl back, Enon abruptly spoke.

"It's strange."

"What is?"

"Before coming here, I thought all Awakeners would be like you. But after being here, I see that's not the case. No one is as outstanding as you, and no one else wavers as you do."

Waver? What? Yuder swallowed his questions and responded.

"What do you mean, I'm wavering?"

"Your energy."

Enon's eyes gleamed heavily, as if penetrating something.

"It's more stable than when I saw it before, but it's still… different somehow. You're hiding something, aren't you?"

He had already told Enon everything about returning from the future. What else could he be hiding? Yuder, puzzled, suddenly looked down at his gloved hand, and gasped quietly.

‘Could he be referring to the spot? The spot has a strong effect on the body; maybe he sensed it that way.’

Enon might be able to discover something unknown by seeing the spot. Yuder had no intention of keeping it a secret from him, but their conversation was cut short when Lusan returned.

“Enon! Please come over here for a moment. I can’t handle this alone!”

“…”

“I have a hunch… I’ll tell you later, Enon. Thanks for the medicine.”

“It’s my job, isn’t it? Just don’t do anything reckless. I heard your conversation with that girl earlier, you’re planning something tonight.”

He heard the conversation with Kanna. Yuder hesitated over what to reply, decided to keep the Red Stone a secret for now, and opened his mouth.

“I’m not doing much. Just something to… investigate underground.”

“Does it have something to do with the massive concentration of power there?”

Indeed, Enon was different from the rest. Yuder maintained his silence and then nodded.

“Yes.”

“I’ve noticed a few mages around as well. I can’t fathom what the leader of your unrecognizable lot is planning to do here. World domination, perhaps?”

It seemed that Enon had yet to have a face-to-face encounter with Kishiar. Curious about what judgment he would pass after seeing Kishiar, Yuder faintly curled the corner of his lips in a smile.

“I dare say it’s quite the opposite, actually…”

“What?”

“Enon, quick!”

“He’s calling you. Aren’t you going?”

At Yuder’s gesture following the urgent call from Lusan, Enon tightly sealed his thin lips and turned away. Almost simultaneously, the door flung open from the other side, and several Cavalry members exclaimed in surprise.

“Wow! This place is amazing!”

“Yuder! Yuder Aile is here, right? Where is he?”

It seemed like another round of non-visiting visits was about to start. Yuder closed his eyes and sighed.

—

“Yuder, you came quickly.”

When evening came, and no one else was visiting him, Yuder put on his uniform over his casual clothes and stepped outside the medical division. At the central staircase leading down to the first basement level, Kanna, who was waiting for him, greeted him with a small smile.

“Let’s go. Yulman, Alik, they’re all waiting.”

The basement, which he was visiting for the first time since before the party, resembled a legendary mage’s cave, filled with

even more magic circles and peculiar objects scattered around the Red Stone.

“Master Yulman! We’re here.”

“Oh! It’s good to see familiar faces.”

Thais Yulman, who was bustling around preparing something inside, approached the two of them. Yuder noticed that his normally neatly groomed beard was wildly unkept and smeared with an unidentifiable golden substance. His eyes, probably due to the impending grand experiment, gleamed with an almost manic fervor.

“I heard you were not feeling well, Yuder. You seem better now.”

“Yes, I am fine now.”

“Good. Missing such a historic experiment would have truly been a tragedy.”

He led Kanna and Yuder closer to the Red Stone. As they passed through several magic circles, the previously unseen interior gradually became more distinct.

They saw the Red Stone and clusters of black gems neatly placed inside a box carved from a transparent magic stone. In the background, Thais’s apprentice, Alik Pelgin, was stirring a pot filled with a liquid that shimmered like molten gold, muttering something under his breath with a grimace on his face. His eyes, blazing with a similar madness as his aged master’s, and his face shadowed to the chin, gave him an almost spectral appearance.

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“Alik! Didn’t your helpers arrive?”

“Ah… You both have come. I’ve been so busy, I didn’t notice.”

“Alik, are you feeling unwell? You look considerably paler than yesterday.”

“Hehe… I’m fine. I just stayed up all night stirring the pot. I’m a bit exhausted, that’s all. If I think that today’s the end… I can handle it. Even though my body is burning with heat and my muscles feel like they’re about to burst… I’m sorry for not offering you tea.”

“No… it’s okay.”

“When I was young, I could do this for a whole week. No fuss.”

While sticking out his tongue and shaking his head, Thais picked up a black gemstone laid out around the red stone.

“This is the best material made by mixing the heart of an ancient dragon, fairy dust, and a material called Sitanium. I guarantee it’s the best vessel for containing the greatest power in existence.”

“What’s Sitanium?”

“Ah, you don’t know? It’s a synthetic material used when two vastly different materials need to be combined. It’s often used to strengthen fragile magic stones. Originally, it was a cheap material used for making low-grade magical tools.”

“How did you end up using that?”

At Yuder’s question, the old mage chuckled awkwardly and averted his eyes.

“Well… you could say it’s thanks to you, in a way.”

“Excuse me?”

“That day, didn’t you get a defensive magic tool bracelet from my disciple? While Alik was taking out an extra bracelet from his bag, he also brought out some Sitanium. It was the party day, and no one was around, so out of boredom, I thought, ‘Why not put it in the pot?’ So, I did.”

Yuder was momentarily lost for words.

“…You just did that experiment with those expensive materials?”

“Hehe.”

Thais Yulman, who had been evading his gaze and laughing, calmly continued.

“In fact, I had a bit of a concern. The heart of the ancient dragon and the fairy powder, when used separately, could withstand the power of the Red Stone, but not completely. But then, unexpectedly, Sitanium glued the two together and the resulting stone… It was unexpectedly magnificent.”

In fact, Thais hadn’t thought that Sitanium could fully blend two such powerful materials. However, the two materials, unexpectedly glued together by the Sitanium, had strangely melted and mixed together to form a black stone that looked like a gem.

When he brought the black stone close to the box where the Red Stone was, the ancient dragon’s heart and the fairy powder, both naturally storing power, reacted gently at once, neither breaking nor

resisting in front of the power of the Red Stone. It was an unexpected success.

“The power of the Red Stone is so strong that it seemed difficult with just one or two of these stones, so I kept making more and more since then. Now, Alik, when that fellow makes the last amount, it will be over. The process doesn’t matter if the result is good. After all, all the great inventions in this world are achieved that way!”

Spitting out words fitting of a reckless mage, he explained that the material in the pot that Alik was stirring was still blending and emitting a gold light, but once it was finished, it would coagulate into black and harden like stone. That would signify the end of preparation.

“Master! The black color is beginning to show.”

“Oh, the end is in sight. You mustn’t let your guard down until the very end!”

“Yes…”

With Alik’s dying voice, the sound of boiling emerged from the pot. Yuder watched Thais dart about, inspecting the magic circles and adjusting the ingredients, while pushing his apprentice aside. He spoke quietly to Kanna.

“Kanna.”

“Hm?”

“Stay back a little. Your task will only be possible after the experiment is finished.”

Kanna’s mission was to read the information of the Red Stone, once the power within it was entirely separated and only the shell remained.

“Okay. What about you?”

Yuder fixed his gaze on the Red Stone in the layered magic circles, which was emitting a suppressed power.

“I need to prepare for if the power transfer process isn’t smooth.”

Just then, a new presence was felt from behind. As Kishiar La Orr, who brought Adjutant Nathan Zuckerman, revealed himself, all eyes were drawn to him.

“The Commander is here!”

“He has arrived. You have come at a very appropriate time.”

As Kanna spoke in a contrasting tone and Thais, who had rushed out of the busy magic circles, greeted him, Kishiar blinked his eyes as if intrigued, looking around at the surrounding scenery.

“Please follow me. The final preparations will be completed soon. The procedure will proceed as previously mentioned. If you have any questions, please let me know.”

“Understood. I’m looking forward to it.”

Kishiar, who had entered through the formation, narrowed his eyes slightly as soon as he saw Yuder.

“You were here first.”

“It’s the task I decided to take on.”

Yuder was focused on the flow of energy surrounding the Red Stone, ready to exert power at any moment. If even a little power leaked incorrectly from the Red Stone, someone might develop a purple spot just like that. He had informed Thais and Alik about the danger of the power of the Red Stone, and Kanna knew from before,

but knowing about a danger did not mean it could be completely prevented.

“There might be danger, so I ask that you and Kanna stand back, Commander.”

“If it’s dangerous for me, it’s the same for you.”

“Even so, it is my duty to step forward at such times. Does not the warlord stand at the front when a battle is imminent?”

Yuder briefly explained, using the warlord in a strategy game as an example. However, upon hearing this, Kishiar threw a question about an unexpected aspect.

“I see. But have you ever learned the strategy game?”

“…”

Thinking about it, the strategy game, which absolutely required a game board and pieces, were hardly ever played by commoners who were busy making a living. Especially for a young man just turning twenty, it was more natural to focus on other things than such a game.

Yuder decided to answer shamelessly after a moment of silence.

‘It’s hardly ever played, not never.’

“I learned a little bit a long time ago.”

It might seem strange for a man who lived alone for several years after living in the mountains with his grandfather to know such a high-class game, but what could be done about that? Nathan Zuckerman, who was standing behind Kishiar, gave him a very strange look, but Yuder responded with an impassive look.

“I didn’t know that. You seem to know well, so let’s play together next time.”

“I’m afraid I may not be good enough to be your opponent, Commander.”

“In that case, I’ll teach you. I like teaching others anyway.”

Indeed, it was even more so if the opponent was a smart student. Kishiar, chuckling softly to himself, seemed to enjoy the situation rather than harbor any doubts, much like his subordinates. Seeing this, Yuder was reminded of his past life.

It was Kishiar who first taught Yuder, who knew nothing, the art of the strategy game. When Yuder asked why he needed to know about the strategy game while working as a Commander, Kishiar had said that to understand and appropriately respond to the metaphors nobles often made about the strategy game, he needed to learn them without question.

There were other essential skills for nobles that Kishiar taught Yuder before he retired, but the moment felt strangely surreal, perhaps because Yuder had recently dreamed of Kishiar talking about the strategy game.

“…”

“We’re done!”

At that moment, Alik loudly announced that all preparations were complete. Yuder watched as Alik broke a hard, black mass inside the pot into pieces the size of his palm and stepped forward.

“Let me help you.”

“Thank you. Please place it next to the Red Stone. Even though I’ve made it this far, I’m a little afraid to get close to that stone.

Haha.”

Alik whispered, handing the black mass to Yuder.

“Place them here, here.”

Thais Yulman, brimming with excitement, poured the black stones that Yuder brought into a large basket along with the stones he had made so far.

“We finally start now! Ah, I feel like my blood is boiling. Yuder, have you ever seen a magic tool being made?”

“I have only seen the completed tools, never the process of making one.”

“That’s true for everyone.”

Thais, letting out a hearty laugh, stepped back a little from the magic circle and took his position.

“The method is simpler than you think. Starting now, my apprentice and I, and one Awakener, will work together. While the Awakener ensures that the power of the revealed Red Stone does not leak out from the box, we will gradually channel that power into the stone using magic.”

“Is it possible to do it with magic alone?”

“Why else would we have drawn so many arrays? The tools placed around us aren’t there for no reason. According to the formula, a unit of magic power capable of summoning a fire….”

After murmuring something incomprehensible, Thais commented on how tough it had been before getting back on topic.

“So, in theory, it is possible! The concern is that something unexpected may happen if the power leaks from the stone.”

“In that case, leave the task of uncovering the box to me.”

“Of course, that was the plan. Kanna praised you several times for being the most skilled Awakener in the Cavalry. If I can’t trust you, who can I trust?”

Yuder quietly turned his gaze toward Kanna. Noticing Yuder’s gaze, she looked back at him with an apprehensive look, her face full of questions.

“I will do my best.”

“You should. You’re far more ambitious than my timid apprentice. Haha.”

“What did you say, Master?”

“Nothing. Stand beside me, no, a step forward. Yes, there, Alik.”

Yuder took a deep breath and looked at the box containing the Red Stone.

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Yuder took a deep breath and examined the box containing the Red Stone. As he stood directly in front of it, focusing his mind, he felt a force surging like a beast chained up.

‘So many magic circles to suppress it, yet… it’s not to be taken lightly.’

He clenched and unclenched his gloved hands, pressing them against the sides of the transparent box. A palpable tension filled the large basement. Before unsealing the box, Yuder glanced over to find Kishiar.

He was standing protectively in front of Kanna and Nathan, watching over Yuder. At a glance, his casual posture, arms folded, seemed overly relaxed. But the tight, strung energy he carried hinted at his unwavering alertness.

Just as Yuder decided that was enough, their eyes met briefly.

“Yuder Aile.”

“Yes.”

“If you sense any danger, retreat immediately.”

“Understood.”

As he responded, Yuder prepared himself to use his strength and slowly peeled the top off the transparent box.

“…Hmm. How is it?”

“It’s fine.”

Thais Yulman, who had cautiously asked the question, wiped the sweat from his forehead with a relieved expression at Yuder's answer.

"Good, good. We've gone to great lengths to create the formation, it's only right! Now all that's left is to add things in order, Alik!"

"Yes, Master."

"Activate the next formation. Prepare yourself."

Even though the strongest barrier that had been blocking external forces was gone, the pressure emanating from the Red Stone was clearly not as strong as before. Yuder, keeping his gaze on the revealed Red Stone, took a step back.

Thais Yulman moved a bit closer to the stone and began to recite an incantation carefully. His voice was so low that the content was impossible to discern. Soon after, his apprentice Alik joined him, their voices with a strange resonance echoing, causing a wave of dizziness.

As their resonance grew stronger, at some point, blue light flowing from under the mages' feet began to transfer to the drawn magic circles that were just white. The spectacle of dozens of lines forming the magic circles across the entire basement interweaving like flames was truly magnificent.

"Wow…!"

From afar, Kanna's exclamation was heard. Yuder also couldn't take his eyes off the sight, as it was his first time seeing such a large-scale formation in motion.

Finally, all the lines forming the circles connected into one light, twinkling beautifully like hundreds, thousands of falling stars in the

night sky. The table where the Red Stone lay was enveloped by a vivid white light bursting up from the central circle beneath it.

Kuuuu. A powerful gust of wind hit them, along with a sensation of the air being torn apart, though no sound was heard. Yuder, panting heavily, strained his eyes to not miss any changes in the Red Stone trapped in the white light.

The white light from the magic circles and the rough energy from the Red Stone clashed and coiled around each other, each trying to overpower the other. Sweat dripped from Thais Yulman and Alik's foreheads, possibly due to the powerful energy of the Red Stone that refused to yield easily, even suppressed by so many circles.

"Alik!"

"Yes!"

When Alik responded to his master's summons and waved his hand, the inexplicable tools that had been resting on the few formations began to glow in different colors. As if receiving the power of the white light that flowed from the magic circle, the intensity of the light grew stronger, grasping the energy of the Red Stone in a tangled state and laboriously pulling it upwards.

"Success!"

The energy of the Red Stone, which until a moment ago had been barely visible compared to the white light, turned bright red and came into everyone's sight.

"Prepare the medium, quickly!"

As Thais Yulman reached out his sweaty hand, Alik picked up a black stone that had been abundantly filled in a basket and handed it to his master.

“Come in, quickly!”

The old mage holding the black stone shouted like a madman and raised his hand abruptly. In response to his call, the white light, which had ensnared the red energy, began to scatter in every direction, splitting into very small beams of light with a roar-like vibration. Thais Yulman pointed with his finger at one of those light beams, which seemed to be at least dozens in number.

From the tip of his finger flowed a tiny magic power that made the light halt, and as he slowly pulled it, the black stone began to react to the approaching power. Finally, the red energy that touched the surface of the stone writhed and twirled around like water being sucked between gaps, and then swiftly disappeared.

“Hmm”

Thais Yulman, who had been clenching his teeth, looked down at the black stone, which had turned red by sucking in the red light, and his eyes filled with momentary emotion. But that emotion was quickly put away, and only a cool judgment filled its place.

“Good. It seems to be going as planned. But don’t let your guard down. Alik, can you handle it?”

“Yes.”

Alik answered strenuously with a weary face.

“Keep your mind clear. We have to do the same thing dozens of times from now on.”

Afterwards, the two mages methodically repeated the process of sucking the red light into the black stone, which they had practiced countless times, and placing it back into the empty basket. As the once seemingly massive red energy began to decrease gradually

like a leaf slowly being chewed up, the oppressive atmosphere that filled the basement began to shift.

The dizziness pressing down on his head began to fade, but as the red energy disappeared, the white light flowing from the magic circle became stronger, giving the feeling that the flow of air was becoming more unstable.

‘When Thais Yulman said it would be more dangerous after the energy in the Red Stone is gone, he must have anticipated this.’

Yuder furrowed his brow and exhaled deeply. So far, the energy flowing from the Red Stone was tightly held by the white light and not leaking elsewhere, but he could not let his guard down for a second.

“Alik! Open your eyes. You nearly dropped the stone!”

“I’msorry, Master.”

Alik Pelgin, who had been busily controlling the white light inside the magic circle with his master and passing the black stones, slowed significantly when the black stone was about halfway dropped. Even though Thais urged him with a desperate face, he could not fully open his eyes, which were slowly closing.

“Alik.”

“Ugh Master. The force is becoming stronger than expected. Even if we buy more time, can we not bypass the controlling formation for a moment? If it continues like this I really might make a mistake.”

“To bypass it… Even if we delay, the amount we have to endure is the same! There’s no good in it for the body!”

“But I really can’t stand it. It’s becoming too hard”

“Didn’t I tell you to get some sleep yesterday, you fool? Normally, you’d be able to handle this much!”

“But still…”

Alik, mid-sentence, suddenly clenched his teeth and his hands began to shake.

“Argh, ugh!”

As he seemed to pull away from the white light, now glowing red, he let out a scream and fell backwards.

“Aaargh!”

The accident happened in an instant. As Alik fell, he knocked over a basket filled with black stones. The stones that were left spilled over onto the floor, scattering in all directions.

“No!”

The two energies that were barely maintaining their balance suddenly destabilized and began to shatter and unravel. The red light, which was still half full, began to roar as if it had been released from its chains, spreading throughout the entire basement. Thais Yulman cursed and swung his hand in frustration.

“Damn it!”

He desperately tried to control the energy, but it was not enough on his own. Just as Alik lost consciousness, his eyes rolling back, Yuder used his power, lifting both his hands.

‘Barrier.’

A harsh wind that could strip flesh split into multiple strands, joining with the pouring water from the ceiling to form a protective shell around everyone. At the same time, the vast room seemed to

constrict as the expanding energies suddenly intensified, producing a blinding light.

‘…This…’

This was not going to end with just two energies intertwining and shattering. An explosion was imminent. Yuder could instinctively feel the danger, his skin trembling with fear.

Not even the potent force that could move nature could prevent this explosion. So, what could? What should he do?

At that moment, he felt a different sensation on the back of his right hand, as if it was responding to his desperate will. From within the blistering heat, like sticking his hand in fire, a red light identical to the power filling the room flowed out piercing through his glove.

Yuder panted heavily, alternating his gaze between the light emanating from his hand and the red energy of the stones filling the room. He didn’t know what this was, but he strangely felt that if he used this power now, he could somehow connect with that red energy.

Without fully understanding the nature of this strange conviction, Yuder grasped it tightly and swung his hand.

With a pain as if striking a heavy, solid wall, the red light swirled with a roar. His fingertips, palms, arms, shoulders, and eventually his entire body trembled as if it would burst, and his consciousness began to drift…

—

When he opened his eyes again, he was still standing in the basement.

Swallowing the dizzying sensation and raising his head, Yuder saw the unbelievable sight of the two energies that were about to explode frozen as if time had stopped. Everyone within the barrier of water and wind that Yuder had summoned was looking at him.

Kanna, huddled in fear, had a look of pure amazement on her face. Nathan Zuckerman, standing in front of her as if to protect her, held his sword drawn, and in his eyes was a rare look of surprise. Alik Pelgin, unconscious on the floor, gave no response, but the shock on Thais Yulman's face, who was slumped beside him, was palpably intense.

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Chapter 180

Yuder observed as the elderly mage who had been watching him turned his head slowly, looking up at someone in greater surprise than before. That someone was none other than Kishiar La Orr. The savage movement that had been pulsating wildly under the feet of the man who now stood atop the magic circle, in place of the unconscious Alik, had completely calmed. A white light flickered, shimmering brilliantly.

“That was a close one.”

Ignoring the gaze of Thais Yulman, Kishiar opened his mouth toward Yuder.

“I don’t know what it is… but it appears that you’ve seized the power of the Red Stone. Is that right?”

Yuder only then realized that a red light was still streaming from his clenched right hand. As he slowly uncurled his fist, the light that had been flowing between his glove and sleeve faded away. The red energy, which had been frozen like ice, started to spin very slowly once again.

“It seems… so. Have you controlled the energy, Commander?”

“Yes.”

Fortunately, by managing things one at a time, they seemed to have averted an explosion. Sighing in relief, he turned to Thais Yulman, as the elderly mage struggled to open his mouth, his face a wreck.

“Wasn’t it that His Grace the Duke of Peletta only possessed the power of the Awakener? This energy, unless you’re a mage, is

impossible to control alone. How could this… Moreover, that thing…”

He couldn’t manage to finish his sentence, and simply gazed at Yuder when referring to ‘that thing.’ His expression revealed that he couldn’t find the words to express his thoughts.

“Thais Yulman.”

Kishiar called him calmly.

“There’s a lot I could say about your neglect of your disciple’s condition in your haste and ambition to expedite your research, but there’s a more pressing matter at hand. I’m not bearing this easily, either, so I’d appreciate it if you could get up and finish things as quickly as possible.”

“Ah…”

“Or are you going to give up just like that?”

Thais Yulman’s dirty beard quivered. He managed to push himself up, panting heavily.

“…No, I’m not.”

With only Kishiar controlling the energy, things had sped up incomparably to before. The fact that the red energy, once caught in Yuder’s hand, had become astonishingly calm, was also a factor.

Yuder wiped the cold sweat trickling down his chin with his sleeve as he watched Thais Yulman, his face stricken with shock, quietly finishing the final steps. The indescribable sensation of gripping and moving that red energy in his hand was still vivid.

What on earth had that been?

—

Finally, Thais Yulman had succeeded in sealing the power of the Red Stone in the last remaining black stone. Watching him, Kishiar withdrew his foot from the magic circle and stepped back a few paces. The brilliantly controlled white light began to slowly fade, and the glow from the magic circles filling the space dimmed as well.

His face was as tranquil as before, but his cheeks were pale, devoid of color. It wasn't until then that Yuder was certain that Kishiar hadn't been holding up as easily as he'd claimed.

All that was left after the light had faded was a silence that felt as deep as being underwater.

"Yuder. Don't let down the barrier yet."

Kishiar began to issue orders, looking around.

"Nathan. Move the unconscious one to the back and guard the basket with the catalyst in it. And Kanna."

"Yes."

Without being told, it was now your turn, Kanna stepped forward with a resolute expression on her face. Yuder looked down at the Red Stone quietly placed in front of him. The stone now seemed devoid of any power, but he couldn't be certain.

"Captain, please wait a moment. May I touch it before Kanna does? Instead of direct contact, I'll try it lightly with my power."

If the answer had been negative, he would have tried to touch it with his hand first, but fortunately, Kishiar only frowned briefly and nodded.

"Go ahead."

Yuder, in front of everyone, pumped more power into his protective barrier and summoned a gentle breeze, which he sent toward the Red Stone.

"…"

Kanna flinched, perhaps the memory of the Red Stone emitting a powerful force the moment an Awakener's power touched it was still vivid in her mind. However, the Red Stone now seemed like an ordinary rock, quietly accepting the breeze. It was the same when water was dropped on it.

Yuder slowly counted to ten internally, and after confirming there was really no change, he finally relaxed his shoulders.

"I have confirmed it. It seems that the power and the stone are completely separated."

"Hoo."

Wiping the sweat from her forehead, Kanna exhaled.

"Then it's my turn. Can you withdraw this wall in front of me?"

Yuder withdrew the water and left the wind. Kanna, feeling the wind tickling her forehead, let out a faint sigh of relief and took a deep breath in front of the palm-sized stone.

Yuder watched as she slowly touched the stone with her fingertips, which were glowing like a mirage. The moment her skin made full contact with the stone, Kanna, who had been closing her eyes, shuddered violently as if struck by lightning.

"Kanna?"

"…"

"Kanna Wand."

Kishiar cautiously called her name, but there was no reply.

And after a moment, Kanna's body stiffened like a log and fell backwards.

"Kanna!"

Yuder managed to prevent her head from hitting the ground using the wind, but Kanna, who had fainted, didn't regain consciousness.

'What the hell is this.'

Yuder hastily removed all the protective barriers and rushed to Kanna, checking her condition. Thankfully, she was breathing normally. Following him swiftly, Kishiar knelt on one knee and twisted the Red Stone out of Kanna's hand. The movement was so natural that Yuder failed to stop him.

"Commander!"

"It's okay."

Despite Yuder's late exclamation, unlike Kanna, Kishiar didn't faint. He carefully rolled the stone in his hand, a chilling question crossing his face.

"I don't feel anything. It would be better to think that the reason she fainted has something to do with the use of her power."

"…"

"First, move the two who fainted to the medical division, and the rest should go and get checked out as well. Leave the basket with the medium in my office, we'll look at it again tomorrow."

Yuder, with a weary expression, glanced at Thais Yulman sprawled on the floor and nodded.

“…Understood. I’ll help.”

“No need.”

However, Kishiar’s response was absolutely firm.

“We can’t have the person who needs to go to the medical division first doing such a task. Can I check your condition before you go?”

“Excuse me?”

Before he could respond, Kishiar had come closer, unbuttoning Yuder’s uniform jacket and swiftly pushing aside the shirt underneath to expose his shoulder. Yuder was inwardly surprised that he hadn’t noticed an opportunity for such an intrusion, even as he was watching. An unfamiliar expression briefly passed over Kishiar’s face.

“…Fortunately, it doesn’t seem as severe as I had anticipated.”

The exposed shoulder was maintaining its clean, original skin color. Yuder realized that Kishiar was recalling and checking for the spot enlargement that had appeared up to his shoulder during his previous visit to the East.

“Did you really need to check this immediately?”

“After witnessing that spectacle earlier, how could I not?”

As Kishiar responded curtly and paused, he took a long breath, closing and then reopening his eyes.

“Any pain?”

“None.”

“Answer accurately.”

“I truly feel nothing.”

Ever since he thought he might touch the power of the Red Stone, there had been no pain, not even during the continual usage of his power. It was still the same. Even as he continued to provide protective barriers for several people, it felt as smooth as before the spot appeared… or perhaps even smoother.

What really had happened? Yuder, recalling a sensation that he had yet to fully comprehend, looked up at Kishiar. Kishiar, too, was looking down at his face.

“We can discuss how you were able to suppress the power of the Red Stone later.”

It seemed he was thinking along the same lines as Yuder.

“For now, go to the medical division. Request treatment from Priest Lusan immediately.”

“Understood.”

“Nathan, take them to the medical division. I’ll take care of things here, so move right away.”

“Understood.”

The loyal adjutant did not question Kishiar’s orders this time either.

With the help of Nathan Zuckerman, who was carrying two unconscious people on his arms, Yuder, supporting a pale and speechless Thais Yulman, left the basement. As they left, Kishiar’s impassive face disappeared behind the door.

—

“What on earth is all this?”

After examining the faces of the newcomers, Enon couldn't hide his shock.

"A building shaking all of a sudden, and a horde of patients, some of whom I've never seen before, and others who left this place, are coming in. What on earth did you do?"

"…"

Yuder, letting Enon's whispering question in his ear slide, turned his gaze toward Kanna lying on the adjacent bed. Looking at her still pale, seemingly asleep face made his heart heavy.

"Are you listening? What exactly did you do?"

"The Red Stone."

Enon bit his lip at Yuder's low answer.

"It's because of that."

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Chapter 181

“The Red Stone… wait a moment. You’re saying it wasn’t in the palace, but here?”

“Yes.”

“So, the power that was underground… Ah. My God. This is insane…”

Just a single phrase caused a considerable change in Enon’s complexion. He was murmuring and piecing together the information, then turned to look at Yuder with an astounded face. Before Enon could ask further, Yuder nodded his head and opened his mouth.

“We’ll talk about the rest later. First, check on Kanna lying over there.”

“Do you think youre my parent or something? Stop ordering me around. What’s important now is figuring out what you guys were up to down there…”

“Kanna fainted after using her powers on the Red Stone. There’s nothing visibly wrong with her, but I thought you might be able to tell something, so please check on her first. It’s a request.”

“…Why are you telling me this now?”

Enon, swallowing a myriad of unsaid words, turned towards the bed where Kanna lay and scrutinized her.

“She seems fine. She’s not completely drained like those mages. Her energy is a bit unstable, but it’s not as bad as yours. It’s common for someone with less inherent power to overuse their power suddenly and then be unable to handle it.”

“So… there isn’t any major problem then?”

“Yes.”

Hearing the short response, Yuder exhaled deeply. He felt a slight sense of relief.

“Let me know as soon as Kanna wakes up. And… can you call Priest Lusan?”

“Why, did you get an injury that needs divine power? If that’s not the case, just tell me. That girl is busy enough treating those mages.”

Yuder fell silent for a moment and then took off the glove on his right hand. Showing was easier than explaining.

“…What’s that?”

Upon seeing Yuder’s exposed hand, Enon wore an unexpectedly strange expression.

“A bruise?”

“No….”

The problem was that Yuder, who should answer, was also greatly surprised. The purple spot that he thought would be noticeably spreading at least to his shoulder was much smaller than expected. He blinked at the spot, which occupied no more area than a thumbprint, and clenched and unclenched his fist a few times, but the situation remained the same.

“This… appeared after I accidentally got hit by the power from the Red Stone. Whenever I use my power, it spreads upward and recedes when it’s subjected to divine power.”

“What?”

“I meant to show you this before we left…”

“Wait. Enough. Bring your hand closer.”

Enon grabbed Yuder’s hand, bringing it close to his face to examine. As he meticulously inspected the palm, flipping it back and forth, his eyes were serious. However, the expression he wore after he let go of Yuder’s hand and lifted his head didn’t seem to carry any satisfying conclusion.

“…It’s not a curse.”

Of course, it couldn’t be. The spot had formed after getting hit by the power of the Red Stone, and if it was a curse, both he and Kishiar would have recognized it. Yuder looked at Enon’s seriously troubled eyes and finally voiced the question he had wanted to ask before heading to the basement.

“I wondered if this might be the cause of the fluctuating energy you mentioned.”

“If what you’re saying is true, then it’s certainly possible…”

Enon was naturally mumbling in agreement, but suddenly jerked his head up and looked straight at Yuder again.

“But you know, compared to when you were leaving, you actually look a bit better now?”

“Better, you say?”

Just as Enon’s expression was confused, Yuder also found the situation equally baffling.

‘Could it be related to my ability to control the power from the Red Stone?’

As Enon scratched his head, observing the thoughtful Yuder, he mused.

“I really don’t know. All you do is pose questions. Let’s bring Lusan and see if this truly disappears with divine power.”

Then, he called Lusan out loud.

“Lusan! Come here for a bit.”

“Sir? I haven’t finished infusing divine power into the elder mage yet.”

“Leave it. As long as he can eat and go to the bathroom, he’ll recover. This here is more urgent.”

Enon’s gruff and straightforward words might have irked Thais Yulman, but luckily, the Elder Mage had fallen asleep as soon as he arrived at the medical division. A moment later, Lusan appeared, holding a holy symbol carved from stone, and shot a puzzled look at Enon and Yuder.

“Isn’t he in good health? Why…”

“He’s not fine. Come here and pour some divine power into his hand.”

“His hand? Is it injured?”

Lusan’s gaze fell on the back of Yuder’s hand. He noticed a small, bruise-like spot, and despite his confusion, he assumed it would only require a small application of divine power, so he quickly put his ability to work.

A bright, warm light, silently bursting forth, sprinkled down from Lusan’s hand onto Yuder’s like powdered light. Then, the spot on the back of Yuder’s hand that had absorbed the light slowly began to

shrink. Although it seemed like a natural outcome on the surface, both Lusan and Enon simultaneously wore grave expressions.

“…Huh? I thought it was a bruise… What’s this? It’s not healing properly.”

While a light bruise or a minor injury would normally disappear instantly upon contact with the light, the spot on the back of Yuder’s hand only began to fade from the edges after pouring in a divine power that would normally mend a severely broken bone. Even after it had reduced to a tiny point, no matter what he tried, it wouldn’t completely vanish, which made Lusan momentarily doubt his own divine power.

“You can stop there, Priest.”

“No, I should be able to heal this… Oh… Why isn’t it working?”

Yuder, feeling slightly apologetic, addressed the young Priest, who wore a look of injustice.

“I reached the same limit when I tried to heal it with divine power elsewhere. It never completely disappears.”

“No, I’ve never failed to heal anything with my divine power. Let me try a bit more. Just a moment.”

“That’s enough, stop. Don’t collapse yourself.”

Enon stopped Lusan by grabbing his arm.

“Divine power isn’t omnipotent. The healer’s job is to make calm judgments without being stubborn.”

“True, but…”

The puzzlement in Lusan’s eyes, trailing off his words, never fully dissipated.

“May I ask how this symptom came about, Yuder? It doesn’t seem to be a curse…”

“That’s for you and I to figure out. This guy here doesn’t know either. Let’s finish up everything else first, and then we can look into it.”

Before Yuder could respond, Enon pushed Lusan away. After displaying his resolve to find a way to cure Yuder’s spot, Lusan turned back to attend to the other mages. Watching Lusan’s priestly robe flutter away, Yuder murmured to himself.

“Thanks, Enon.”

“I didn’t do it for you.”

Enon spat out his still not entirely honest reply, looking down at Yuder with a scrunched face.

“Didn’t such things happen where you came from? If you knew about that strange blemish, you could have avoided it in advance, right?”

“Well…”

Recalling the ghastly face of Kishiar he’d seen in his dream, Yuder casually replied.

“There might have been, but I didn’t know about it because it wasn’t related to me then.”

“Hmph. I see.”

“And the blemish isn’t such a big problem.”

“If a blemish that doesn’t disappear even when poured with divine power isn’t a big problem, then what is? Ordinary people would

despair as if they were going to die if such a thing happened to their bodies. Even if it's a blemish that doesn't hurt…"

"It's not that it doesn't hurt."

"Then isn't it a bigger problem?"

Enon inquired as if he was extremely curious. Yuder slowly opened his mouth, gazing at Enon's face where a keen interest was evident.

"Even if I have a blemish like that, I can still use my power and I don't die. It doesn't interfere with achieving my goals. That's enough, I think."

When the blemish flared up, it was a bit painful, but it didn't feel severe compared to the many injuries and tortures he'd endured in his previous life. It was an exceedingly cool-headed assessment.

"Goals, you mean, protecting your boss?"

"That's right."

And Enon too, and the rest of the people and the world. He swallowed the rest of the words, responding briefly, yet his underlying feelings seemed to have been conveyed well as Enon's eyes darkened.

"If that's your true intention, there are two possibilities."

"…"

"Either he becomes a very important person in the future, or you had a deeply loving relationship with your boss. Or both. Which one is it?"

Yuder couldn't immediately open his mouth. While the former was a logical inference, he couldn't understand how the latter thought

had sprung up.

“Love? I don’t know why you would think that, but anyway, it’s different.”

“What’s so different? From your expression when you talk about it…”

“Sir Aile, are you still awake?”

Their conversation came to an abrupt end as Nathan Zuckerman entered the room just as the door opened. Enon, with a furrowed brow, stepped back, and Yuder turned his head towards him. Nathan, who had brought the patients to the medical division and then went back down to the basement where Kishiar was, was holding a few unfamiliar papers in his hand.

“Did you receive treatment from the Priest?”

“I did.”

“That’s fortunate. The Duke wanted to ask about that first.”

“…Is the Commander alright?”

What had Kishiar, who had been left alone in the basement, been doing? As he recalled the face that looked the most weary since he’d returned to the past, Nathan lightly nodded and drew the curtain around Yuder’s bed and came closer.

“After inspecting inside and confirming there was no problem, he went to calm the members.”

Enon had said the building shook. He’d felt the tremor, so the other members must have felt it too. He belatedly thought that it must have been quite a chaotic situation outside, even if they weren’t aware of it.

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Chapter 182

“…I’ll go out and assist,” Yuder offered.

“There’s no need,” Nathan replied, “only a few were startled from their sleep and have come out. Instead, please take this.”

He handed him a bundle of papers he was holding. Instinctively, Yuder scanned the contents written on it and was taken aback.

“This is…”

The papers were filled with observations concerning the interactions between Alpha Awakeners and Omega Awakeners. It was the research record of Beltrail, which Kishiar had promised to deliver on the day he returned from the Imperial Palace.

“The Duke said he had promised to give this to Sir Aile. He actually intended to give it to you as soon as today’s business was concluded, but with things turning out like this, he asked me to deliver it.”

“Thank you.”

His leisurely reply sounded oddly unfamiliar. Yuder looked down at the papers in his hand and casually placed them aside. Right now, there were more pressing issues piled up like a mountain.

“May I ask something, Sir Zuckerman?”

“I was just about to ask something from Sir Aile as well. Go ahead.”

After getting his permission, he promptly opened his mouth and quickly asked the question he was most curious about.

“Was the power the Commander used earlier… real?”

His question was vague enough that anyone overhearing wouldn’t be able to discern its context. Yet both of us knew that ‘power’ referred to Kishiar’s control over the magic circle.

“Yes, just as you saw.”

As expected. He lightly bit his dry lips, recalling Kishiar’s adept control of the magic circle, even more proficient than Alik.

‘Awakener’s power. Divine power. Sword aura. And now, magic?’

Although he was a human, Yuder never imagined he would be able to wield magic. He had shown himself using numerous magic tools, but that didn’t necessarily mean he was a mage.

However, thinking about it, the fact that one person was using the other three powers was unbelievable in itself. If only one astonishing fact existed, it would be startling, but when several overlapped, the shock gradually numbed. That’s why he wasn’t as surprised as the others when he saw Kishiar stepping on and controlling the magic circle.

Among the information related to Kishiar that Enon showed him, there was a rumor that ‘he learned magic from Imperial Mages in his childhood.’ This flashed through his mind when he returned to the medical division and lay down again on the sickbed.

“I see. Thank you for your answer.”

“Is that the only thing you’re curious about?”

“Yes.”

He could ask the rest to Kishiar himself. If he didn’t answer right away, it would be as simple as stepping back.

Upon hearing his response, Nathan showed a rare expression on his distinctively red, soYudern face.

“…Then now, I’ll ask my question. Just how did you, Sir Aile, manage to do what you did back then?”

His gaze fell on his right hand. His eyes, weighed down heavily, seemed to recall the moment when he had grabbed the end of the energy emanating from the Red Stone and stopped it.

“I’m not an Awakener, but that thing back then…”

“…”

“I can use sword aura too, and my lord is a somewhat extraordinary person, so I thought I had a good understanding of abilities that surpass ordinary people. But that was the first time I had seen something like that. Even just imagining for a moment what would happen if the person who could perform such a miracle was my enemy made me feel like I wouldn’t be able to win.”

“You have a good imagination.”

“It’s no joke.”

Nathan replied in his terse manner.

“You mentioned before, you felt confident that given time, you could surpass me.”

“Yes.”

“Was that prediction made considering the power you now hold?”

A faint glimmer of suspicion and caution towards Yuder could be read deep within Nathan’s eyes. He was worried about the uncertainty surrounding this unknown person. He was unsure

whether Yuder could turn out to be an enemy of Kishiar, or even if he wasn't currently, whether he could ever be trusted fully.

Such emotions from Nathan were, however, greatly welcomed by Yuder. His doubts were natural responses from a knight loyal only to Kishiar. Had Nathan been easily overwhelmed or had his doubts quelled by the power Yuder demonstrated, Yuder would have deemed him untrustworthy.

Yuder found himself thinking back to the Nathan Zuckerman from his previous life. The loyal knight and formidable swordmaster was absent from Peletta Castle on the day of Kishiar's death. The Katchian Emperor had claimed it was the optimal day to execute their plans as Nathan Zuckerman had been away, obeying the orders of the Duke of Peletta.

What would have happened if Yuder had encountered him that day? The mission might not have been accomplished so easily…

"You're suspicious of me, Sir Zuckerman."

"I can't deny that."

"I told you those words before I injured my hand. I don't know why what happened today happened, but I guess it might have something to do with my injured hand."

"…"

"Just as you worry, I will never betray the Commander or become an enemy. However, I will not ask you to trust me. If you have doubts, keep observing me as much as you need."

The stronger his doubts and caution grew, the better it would help to prevent Kishiar La Orr from dying a fruitless death as in his previous life. Yuder gave a cold smile, feeling content.

“I don’t understand you, Sir Aile.”

A hollow voice finally escaped the lips of Nathan Zuckerman who had been looking at Yuder with a foreign gaze.

“You don’t need to. Just continue as you have been.”

“…”

Nathan Zuckerman did not respond. Before turning away from Yuder, he left one last statement.

“Nevertheless, you saved my life today. I will repay this debt someday. You should rest.”

After he disappeared, Yuder closed his eyes to shake off the memories from his past that kept visiting him. What happened today would end with today. With so many tasks piled up ahead, there was no need to dwell on the past.

—

The following day, the mages, finally freed from their exhaustion, opened their eyes. Thais Yulman, with a face eager to say so much, circled around Yuder, but Yuder did not say a word to him.

Alik Pelgin was slightly amnesiac from the moments before he fainted. Having been extremely afraid that the experiment might have failed, he was elated to hear it had succeeded, but after hearing ‘how’ it was made possible, he chose to remain silent.

The simple explanation that Duke Peletta had stepped in to help Thais finish the work should have given an approximate idea of the unbelievable event that had occurred.

However, the unfortunate and astonishing incidents that happened to Alik did not end there.

“…Your magical power has changed peculiarly? Although you’ve recovered from exhaustion and depletion… I wonder why.”

Lusan, standing by Alik’s bedside, asked with a grave face. Alik shook his head anxiously and looked down at his hands.

“Something feels different from yesterday. Ever since I woke up, something inside me feels…odd, as if a foreign magic has entered. Priest, am I really okay?”

“Alik, why don’t you try a basic magic operation again? Perhaps it will give us a clue.”

Even in response to the advice of the elderly mage lying in the bed next to him, Alik’s furrowed face remained unchanged.

“I’ve already tried that, Master. However, this unfamiliar energy and my original magic feel as if they’re occupying my body separately, rendering it useless.”

Having been lying down and listening to their conversation, Yuder suddenly had an intuition and sat up.

“…That power. Can you control it separately?”

Surprised by Yuder’s sudden interruption, Alik nearly fell out of the bed, but soon he lowered his eyes and murmured a thoughtful “Hmm…”

“Well… It seems possible…”

“Don’t try to control it like magic, just use it naturally as it flows.”

“Naturally? How… Huh?”

In that instant, something astonishing happened before Alik’s eyes. His mouth gaped open at the sight of droplets of water that had suddenly materialized before him.

“Water… elemental magic?”

“But Alik, you’ve never learned elemental magic. How is this possible?”

“I don’t know, Master. I didn’t even try to use any magic…”

“It’s an awakening.”

Yuder quietly revealed the cause of the situation to the two astonished mages.

“It seems you’ve awakened the ability to summon water.”

“Me… I’ve awakened?”

Alik looked back and forth in disbelief between the hovering water droplets before him and Yuder’s face. The elderly mage was equally astonished.

“An awakening? Are you certain? My disciple… has become an Awakener?”

“Isn’t the power you just used the most solid evidence?”

Without predefined magic formulas or intensive training for manipulating mana, without gathering energy through years of sword training like a knight, a power that can be used as if it was innate since birth.

That was indeed the distinct characteristic that set the power of the Awakeners apart from all other abilities.

At Yuder’s serene words, everyone’s eyes were drawn to Alik. After repeating the action of summoning and vanishing water several times, Alik opened his trembling eyes.

“It seems… it’s real. How can this be… I’m a mage, how can I become an Awakener?”

“There’s no rule stating that a mage cannot be Awakener, Alik.”

There were likely other mage Awakeners out there, just yet to be discovered. And although rare, more would continue to emerge in the future.

‘Even though there was no famous individual who was a mage and an Awakener in my previous life…’

Alik had not been among them.

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The only clue pointing to the reason for his awakening in this life was a single fact: Alik had been working close to the Red Stone, roaming around underground all this while.

Yuder recalled the soldiers who had been guarding the mountain where the Red Stone had fallen, a far higher proportion of them had awakened compared to other places. He had a creeping suspicion that a similar cause and effect could be behind Alik's current situation.

"It's fascinating. I've always wanted to learn elemental magic, but my inherent magical power was insufficient. Who would've thought I'd get to experience it this way… haha. I can't wait to show it off to those haughty colleagues at the Pearl Tower!"

While Yuder was lost in his thoughts, Alik kept summoning droplets of water. He had never used elemental magic before, but perhaps thanks to what he had seen and heard over someone's shoulder, he adapted quickly. Watching Alik test his abilities in a variety of ways, Yuder could sense how thrilled he was.

'The amount of water he can summon isn't much… but he's a mage. He'll certainly find a way to use it effectively.'

In any case, the mages who received respect were those who could use fancy elemental magic. After all, every one of the legendary archmages had done so.

Yuder glanced at Alik's mentor sitting next to Alik's bed. Unlike the excited student, Thais Yulman had a somewhat subtle expression.

"Awakening…"

He hadn’t said anything for about an hour. Yuder, who thought he might be dispirited, realized he was wrong when Thais rushed to his side the moment Alik got up to go to the bathroom. The emotion brimming in his wrinkled eyes was the surprise of someone who had realized something different from before.

“Yuder. A new hypothesis about an aspect I previously overlooked popped into my head. Can I get your opinion on it?”

He won’t ask about yesterday’s incident at all, will he? A hint of the madness from when they had been conducting the experiment yesterday flickered across his rapidly whispering face. Yuder nodded at him and got up from his seat.

“Of course. Go ahead.”

“After seeing my student awaken, I had a sudden thought.”

The old mage who had blocked the surrounding eyes with a curtain, perhaps worried that Yuder might change his mind, sat firmly on the chair next to him and opened his mouth very covertly.

“We’ve been taking it for granted and not thinking deeply about it, but didn’t you all awaken after the Red Stone fell from the sky? Therefore… it must be because the power emitted by the Red Stone spread across the whole continent.”

“Yes.”

“Yuder. Do you know how many Awakeners there are in each country currently?”

“Is there anyone who would know that accurately?”

“Indeed. But what is certain is that the most Awakeners occurred in this empire where the Red Stone fell. I have a friend living far north, on the edge of Kham. He said there’s only been one

Awakener there so far. Kham might be a small island nation, but it's populous enough to form a kingdom. And not just Kham, the nearby countries are also known to have few Awakeners."

After saying this, Thais Yulman swallowed as if his throat were burning.

"My apprentice and I were at the same place as the Red Stone for several days while preparing for the experiment. So, wouldn't it not be a strange assumption that the closer one is exposed to the stone's power, the higher the probability of turning into an Awakener?"

The words had been in the form of a question, but there already seemed to be certainty within Thais. Yuder kept silent for a moment before responding to Thais' anxious anticipation with a nod.

"Actually, from what I saw and heard when we got that stone, I too was thinking there's a high possibility."

"What you heard and saw? What was it?"

Currently, aside from Yuder, only Kishiar was aware of the report that an unusually large number of Awakeners had emerged among the soldiers guarding the vicinity where the Red Stone had fallen. He could tell Thais Yulman, who might be able to pierce through something unexpected, but he was somewhat dubious if it would be okay to trust him and tell him based on his own judgment alone.

Whether he noticed Yuder's pondering expression, the old mage quickly grasped Yuder's sleeve and made a desperate face.

"I've already pledged to not mention what happened here anywhere else. You know, don't you? I'll keep it a secret, so tell me. I'm ready to devote the rest of my life to this research."

"…Alright."

In the end, Yuder briefly summarized and told him what had happened at that time.

“It’s not much, but I heard a story from the soldiers I met when I went to get the stone…”

Among the regular soldiers searching the mountain range where the Red Stone had fallen, an astonishing number of Awakeners had continually emerged. But the upper ranks of the Imperial Army didn’t pay any mind, and the soldiers themselves didn’t think much of it, so there hadn’t been any reports on it for two years. He told him this, leaving out the fact that Yuder himself had heard and investigated it, and vaguely added that Kishiar had found it unusual after learning about it.

Thais Yulman, who had been silent for a while, suddenly started laughing.

“I knew it. I knew my thoughts were not mistaken.”

“…”

“Change. That stone has the power to change humans.”

Even without Yuder’s response, he continued speaking rapidly, as if obsessed with something.

“I wonder what determines the change. The main cause would be how closely, and how much power is received. I wonder what the difference is with children born with magical power. Perhaps the reason most Awakeners are young is because they are accustomed to change and growth. I wonder how it changes the body, how it induces change! I really want to know, I can’t stand it. Could we separate the powers already dispersed in the air and contain them in our bodies like magic? If that’s possible… ah, I don’t have time for this.”

The old mage who stood up from his seat, unable to sit still, had a gleaming look in his eyes that showed a desire even greater than when he was experimenting yesterday.

“If it works out, we might be able to use the power we’ve separated to turn anyone we want into an Awakener, or give more power to those who are already Awakeners! Just like the magic revolution of Archmage Luma a thousand years ago, when magic first appeared, I, no, we might be able to do it!”

As he muttered on, making sense of his own words, his excited breath couldn’t be concealed. He finally opened the curtain and ran outside. In place of the absent Enon, Lusan and Alik, who had been trimming herbs, were startled and looked at him.

“M, Master? Where are you going?”

“I need to see the Commander! Right now!”

Leaving only those words, he disappeared, leaving Alik who was blankly staring at his retreating figure to turn towards Yuder, as if asking what on earth was going on.

“Why did Master behave like that? He mentioned something about Luma’s magic revolution just before… Did I mishear?”

“No, you’re correct. He was discussing his research and then suddenly rushed off.”

“He must’ve jumped into his own thoughts and skipped over a lot of details again.”

Alik sighed with a face that suggested he had expected such behavior. Yuder, reclining on the bed, pulled the blanket over him and faced Alik, opening his mouth to ask, “But, what is this magic revolution?”

“Ah, that.”

Seeming relieved to have a topic he could explain, Alik began his exposition.

“It’s an incident that cannot be separated from the research Master and I were conducting on early magic and magic powers. There are so many legends about Luma that many people, including myself, are skeptical about whether they’re real.”

Just then, Enon returned to his place, paused his steps upon hearing Alik’s words. Yuder noticed his reaction to the name ‘Luma’.

Regardless of Enon’s return, Alik, who saw no reason to stop speaking, continued his tale.

“It’s said that a thousand years ago, when Luma was active, magic was treated like devil’s sorcery. The mages of that era were few, dealing with immense power without a systematic method, making it difficult to train successors. Luma, having overcome ten trials, proved that magic and magic powers can be harnessed by human strength and spread magic throughout the world as we know it now.”

“If that’s true… it’s incredible.”

Yuder replied while observing Enon’s expression. Enon, sitting quietly next to Lusan and trimming herb leaves, didn’t look much different from usual.

“Indeed. But for this story to hold up, one must assume that magic did not exist at all a thousand years ago, which is hard to believe. Hence, Master and I have been researching the unique, unexplored properties of magic, believing that magic and magic powers existed in the world before, but the records have been lost.”

“Ah, Enon! You can’t tear the herbs like that.”

Just then, Lusan, who had been quietly listening to the conversation, suddenly cried out in surprise. Yuder saw the leaves in Enon's hand, which were now harshly torn compared to their previous state.

"…I see."

"In fact, if you look at the ancient records before the establishment of the Orr Empire… well, of course, it's hard to be sure about their authenticity. Anyway, there's no record of mages or magic then, which is why many people believe in Luma's magic revolution."

"There must be at least one, surely."

"No, there really isn't a single one among those discovered so far."

"Could it be due to the great destruction a thousand years ago?"

Lusan, who had taken back the torn herb leaf and was trimming it, interjected unexpectedly.

"It's mentioned in the Scripture of the Sun God. The part related to that great destruction."

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Lusan murmured, seemingly reciting a section of the scripture.

” All shackles that had bound mankind disappeared, and all that had been achieved until then sunk into oblivion, yet only the glory of God survived… Since everything disappeared, there would be no records left. Hence, there are hardly any records prior to a thousand years ago, other than the scripture.

Hmm, you’re right. As you’ve said, Priest, it might be related. It’s difficult for us to understand now, though.

Alik agreed with a smile. Afterward, everyone fell silent, lost in their own thoughts. Lusan, who had finished sorting the herbs, was the first to speak again.

“I was not aware of the magic revolution, but after hearing about it, I get the feeling that similar events happen in every era. In fact, there’s a legend in the first chapter of the scripture, covering a time much earlier than the great destruction, that mirrors our current discussion.”

“The first chapter of the scripture I seem to recall hearing it in the temple as a child, but my memory fails me. I rarely visited the temple after entering the Pearl Tower at the age of seven. Ha-ha.”

“That’s understandable. It’s a section full of historical tales, so priests usually do not bring it up during sermons. I wouldn’t have studied it either if I hadn’t spent time in the Temple.”

“So, what’s the story?”

At Alik’s question, Lusan looked up as if searching his memory.

“When the Sun God first sent power down to the world, the ignorant people refused to believe. The world was full of chaos and disasters, so everyone believed in the power of the Black Moon. That’s why ‘Orhe’, a manifestation of the god and his emissary, sacrificed himself, confronting the Black Moon to prove the true existence of the god’s power before the people.”

Yuder recalled the contents of the Sun God scripture he had read a long time ago. On hearing it, it seemed like such a story had been there.

‘The story of the emissary Orhe… Perhaps it was about the miracle where he was torn to pieces ten times and each time healed by the divine power.’

Now, reattaching torn limbs ten times could be done by a few priests with strong divine power, so it was not surprising. However, it would have been quite astounding in the olden days when they did not know about divine power.

Even after the topic had passed, Lusan and Alik continued their conversation like well-matched friends. Yuder was looking after Kanna, who was still struggling to regain her senses. Her closed eyes showed no sign of opening yet.

‘I should have inspected it a bit more before asking her to read it.’

The information Kanna had deciphered so far had mostly been related to sentient and willful humans. Therefore, he had thought it more likely that she would fail to read anything, even if she used her power on the Red Stone, but Kishiar and Yuder had decided it was better to try than not.

Yuder sighed and turned his head.

“Enon.”

Enon, who had been idly sitting after finishing sorting the herbs, turned his head.

“May I ask why you did that earlier?”

“What?”

Enon retorted, seeming unsure of what Yuder was asking. But Yuder still had the image in his mind of Enon carelessly handling the herbs, as if he were mashing them.

Enon was known to be the Guardian of Luma, an ancient being. This was a fact revealed by his past self. Yet, how Enon was precisely related to the great Archmage Luma, and what he thought about him, remained unknown.

‘I’ve only heard Enon speak about Luma directly once, if I remember correctly.’

When Enon had heard about Yuder’s journey back in time, he had become irate, claiming it was a magic that even Luma had never successfully cast.

“Could you perhaps…”

“If you have the time to care about other things, why not eat or take a walk? There’s nothing worse than being looked at that way by someone who was bedridden until yesterday.”

Before Yuder could voice his inquiry about Luma, Enon curtly cut him off. Enon’s icy gaze pinned him down as he closed in.

“Even if that ‘me’ who taught you my name did exist, the me here and now doesn’t want to engage in such an intimate conversation with you. We aren’t that close yet. Understand?”

His mood was clearly off. That much was certain.

However, Enon was still Enon. After a moment of silence, Yuder apologized.

“I’m sorry. I overstepped.”

“…”

Enon ruffled his bangs and turned away. Yuder thought he should bring him some lemons later.

Not wanting to leave while Kanna was still unconscious, Yuder took out a bundle of paper he had fallen asleep without reading the previous night. It was Beltrail’s research records that Kishiar had sent. To prevent the mage Alik from becoming interested, he firmly drew the curtain before spreading out the paper. The elegantly transcribed handwriting met his gaze. Not noticing it when he had briefly glanced at it yesterday, he quickly surmised who the familiar elegant script belonged to.

‘Kishiar…’

When did he find the time to write all this amidst his relentless busyness? As he observed the lines of writing, meticulously aligned without a single smudge, he recalled the face of Kishiar who had pushed off his uniform with a tired face yesterday.

Yuder quickly read through all the documents organized on a few sheets of paper. To make it easier for the reader to understand, Kishiar had transcribed sentences from the original text of Beltrail’s research records and added a brief summary at the end.

Although Beltrail’s research was a reckless criminal act carried out haphazardly without consistency or standards, there were still a few phenomena that appeared repeatedly. Yuder read a few eye-catching phrases from the summaries Kishiar had added multiple times.

- In Alphas and Omegas who have reached their mating cycles, sexual attraction always occurs. However, the degree of attraction varies from person to person. One Alpha copulated with an Omega for several days but did not engage in any sexual activity for a day after changing partners. Even if one party is not in heat, sexual attraction can occur, but the probability of copulation appears to be extremely low if one party is in a normal state.
- Pregnancy does not always result from copulation between Alphas and Omegas who have reached their mating cycles. However, it is believed that Omega Awakeners have a high probability of becoming pregnant even through sexual intercourse with non-Awakeners.
- Among Awakeners who have completed the manifestation of their second gender, specific physical reactions occur even when not in heat. The most notable is the so-called ‘scent’, a smell that only they can detect, along with heightened senses, sexual arousal, excessive protectiveness, a sense of unity surpassing camaraderie, etc. Even in same-gendered pairs, it’s as if they recognize each other as if they were opposite genders.
- It is uncertain whether the body, which undergoes another transformation after awakening and the manifestation of the second gender, has a positive effect on diseases and the like that had been present before the awakening. However, Awakeners who have manifested their second gender certainly become vulnerable during heat, so it can be assumed they have weaknesses compared to Awakeners who haven’t manifested.

Upon reading everything repeatedly to the very end, there was another note added by Kishiar on the back of the final page.

- In fact, there’s no need to believe all these distasteful writings. Proper research will soon begin.

It was written very small and faintly. However, the moment Yuder saw this sentence, he felt the gravity of the situation lift.

He rose from his seat, donned his outer garment, folded the papers several times, and put them in his pocket. As he moved to step outside, Enon grumbled a question.

“Where’re you off to?”

“The Commander’s office.”

While leaving the medical division and heading upwards, several Cavalry members he met on the way asked if he was now fully recovered. As he passed them and arrived on the fifth floor, he found Thais Yulman with a desolate look on his face, pacing in front of the Commander’s office.

“Yulman, why are you out here?”

“Ah, you’ve come as well?”

“Have you finished your conversation?”

His face, which had briefly brightened, darkened again at Yuder’s question.

“No, actually, I haven’t even been able to enter.”

“Excuse me? The Commander isn’t inside?”

“No, he is. But that adjutant told me the Commander hasn’t woken up yet and to come back later. It’s midday and we’re in a hurry…!”

Thais, who had been anxiously glaring at the closed door, let out a heavy sigh.

“Try knocking yourself. I’ve been knocking for a while now, and he’s not even coming to the door. You’re his assistant, so even if he’s sleeping, he’ll let you in early.”

“Well, I…”

Yuder didn’t want to disturb Kishiar’s rest if he was really asleep. He opened his mouth to say he would come back later, but coincidentally, at that moment, the door opened and Nathan Zuckerman poked his head out.

“…Sir Aile. Please come in.”

The Elder Mage looked taken aback by how naturally Nathan seemed to have anticipated his arrival.

‘See? Go in and take me with you!’

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Leaving Thais Yulman's heated gaze behind, Yuder stepped timidly inside. As soon as the door closed, he turned to question Nathan Zuckerman.

"How did you know I had come?"

"The Duke sent word."

"And how did the Commander know I was coming"

"From time to time, he discerns the movements of those far away from his place."

So, did Kishiar sense my arrival from inside? After a moment's hesitation, Yuder opened his mouth.

"If he is awake, why did you not allow Yulman to enter?"

At his words, Nathan, who was walking ahead, halted and looked back.

"It was a matter of trust. In fact, I thought it was not yet time for Sir Yulman to enter."

A low voice laden with a subtle undercurrent of meaning. Yuder silently surveyed Nathan Zuckerman's face.

"Is the Commander… perhaps ill?"

Nathan did not immediately respond to his question. Yuder watched as the man facing him turned without confirmation or denial and continued walking forward, then quickly followed.

The interior of the Commander’s office was much quieter than usual. The furnace, unlit, had lost its glow, and the large, usually sunlit window was veiled by dark curtains. As they passed the desk where Kishiar usually worked and entered the inner corridor, private areas accessible to the Commander were revealed. Nathan Zuckerman approached the furthest room, a bedroom, and knocked respectfully.

“Go in.”

“Are you not coming in, Sir Zuckerman?”

“The Commander ordered that when Sir Aile arrives, he should enter alone.”

Leaving these words behind, Nathan turned and disappeared in the opposite direction. Yuder, looking down at the closed door handle, slowly reached out and pulled it open. The door swung open silently, revealing the familiar room.

The dome-shaped ceiling soaring high above. A small glass skylight at its apex. The colorful flames flickering in the marble fireplace, identical to the one in the Commander’s office. And a large bed made of white wood, befitting the dignity and nobility of the owner.

Everything was identical to a dream he had had the day he had awoken from the manifestation at the Imperial Palace, causing a strange sense of dj vu.

“You’re here, so why are you silent?”

While he was blankly observing the room, a languid voice came from the bed. Only then did Yuder come to his senses, as if waking from a dream, and bowed his head.

“It’s Yuder Aile. I didn’t intend to disturb your rest, but since you knew I was here and called for me… I apologize.”

“That’s fine. I told Nathan to have you come in. There’s no need to apologize. But… I can’t see you from here. Will you come closer?”

Even though he usually spoke slowly, his voice now was slower, much lower and deeper than usual.

‘Could he really be ill?’

As Yuder cautiously moved closer to the bed, a faint scent wafted in the air. A small candlestick beside the bed was lit, giving off a gentle light.

Following that light, Kishiar’s face finally emerged from behind the curtain. Instead of his usual robe, he was loosely draped in a nightgown, half-reclined on the bed, with an opened book lying upside down on his lap.

Kishiar’s normally neat, golden hair was disheveled, sticking to his forehead in an unfamiliar way. Unable to look away, Kishiar let a small smile tug at the corner of his lips. His face was marked with clear signs of fatigue, but his smile managed to lighten the atmosphere as if the exhaustion had momentarily dissipated.

“Even though your expression doesn’t change, I can tell you’re surprised. It seems I’ve become quite adept at reading your face.”

“Are you unwell?”

“Hmm You know about the unpleasant event that took place yesterday, don’t you? Ah, there’s a chair nearby, why don’t you sit?”

Kishiar gestured towards the chair after closing his book and setting it aside. Only after Yuder had taken a seat did Kishiar exhale deeply, resuming the conversation at a relaxed pace.

“Magic is more taxing than swordsmanship or divine power. The stronger the force, the larger the ripple it creates when it moves. I would have preferred not to use it directly, but given the circumstances”

“So, you’re saying your current state is due to the strain from controlling the magic circle yesterday?”

“You could say that.”

Under the flickering candlelight, Kishiar’s face glowed pale, devoid of any color. Seeing his lips look noticeably drier and paler than usual, a sudden unease arose.

Yuder had seen Kishiar like this in his previous life. More times than he could count.

“I thought you might have noticed from before, but I can’t use my power recklessly. I can’t freely utilize what I possess like others. I can’t, and I shouldn’t. If I violate this, as you can see, this happens. But today is a bit better. A day’s rest should see me improved.”

Yuder had guessed there must be some reason Kishiar had hidden his powers and used them sparingly. However, in Kishiar’s words, he sensed a compulsory cause beyond simply not wanting to expose his powers to others.

“I can’t let Thais Yulman see me like this. Maybe if he were trustworthy, but as long as he’s part of the Pearl Tower, it’s not possible. It’s fortunate you came at an appropriate time.”

So, does that mean you trust me enough to show me this side of you? Yuder wanted to ask, but swallowed the words at the last moment. It was only now that he understood what Nathan Zuckerman had said before he entered.

Concerns about Duke Peletta's health were something he could not reveal, especially when he already had many enemies. After opening and closing his mouth a few times, Yuder finally managed to force out a question.

"May I ask how long this has been going on?"

Since when had using his power been so strenuous? When had this condition started?

"Well It's been quite a while. Not since birth, though."

"I see. Is it an incurable symptom? What exactly triggers these symptoms when you use your power? Is it part of a curse? Or perhaps"

"Haha. Don't be too serious. I know the cause. As for the cure I'm not sure yet. But it's not something you should worry about."

If this wasn't serious enough to worry about, then what was? Yuder wanted to say more, but Kishiar spoke first, leaving him unable to continue.

"Yuder, have you ever heard that each person's body has a predetermined capacity for holding energy?"

"…I've heard that the amount of magic power a mage can absorb without burdening the heart varies innately."

This was, of course, a story from his previous life. Drawing from that tale, Yuder had discovered the presence of a mana hole within the body of an Awakener, which could absorb, store, and release energy. Kishiar nodded and continued.

"It's a similar concept. Among those who wield power, this belief exists universally. No matter how much a person trains, the amount of energy the body can accommodate is believed to have a limit. But

what if the vessel becomes overly filled with energy, to the point where it creates turbulence within?”

“…It would exert pressure.”

“Yes. And in unfortunate cases, it can even shatter. A knight who has suffered this would no longer be able to use his swordsmanship, and a mage, his magic. They would remain alive but their life force would cease to accumulate and gradually leak out. Eventually, when all is drained, death comes. A most painful process indeed.”

“…Are such cases, common?”

“Not common. It happens very rarely among seasoned swordmasters or senior mages who have become too old and frail to withstand the power they’ve accumulated over the years.”

“…”

The reason for his speech was clear, even without asking. Yuder hesitated, then cautiously ventured another question.

“Commander, you’re not implying that… your current condition is… like that, are you?”

“Of course not.”

Kishiar’s response was swift and resolute.

“Not at the moment. Although, there were times in the past when I thought it could happen.”

When he thought his vessel might break and lead to death. When could that have been? As Yuder looked at him with hesitation, a gleam of amusement flickered in Kishiar’s eyes.

“That was two years ago. Before the Red Stone fell. Haven’t I told you before?”

“If it was two years ago…”

“When I awakened and manifested, I experienced such intense pain that I expelled everyone, and stayed alone in Peletta Castle, ready to die.”

The words he had spoken then briefly flashed across Yuder’s mind before dissipating.

“Well, since that day, my vessel has become quite robust, so there hasn’t been a need to contemplate death. However, I still can’t move a great deal of power at once. A vessel that nearly broke needs to be used sparingly, don’t you think?”

“That’s… a relief…”

As he blankly responded, a thunderbolt of realization struck him. Memories and dreams from a long time ago fluttered through his mind.

Kishiar, gradually weakening as his resignation as the Commander loomed closer. The glove he never took off. The faint whisper in a dream, hoping that his vessel didn’t shatter due to the injury incurred while recovering the Red Stone.

The vessel. Yes. He had also referred to it as a vessel back then… He had never understood that term and yet, surprisingly, he heard it again here. A chill ran down his spine.

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Chapter 186

“Since I’ve now exposed all my power, I thought it was high time I revealed everything. Had I known you’d be this shocked, I would’ve waited a bit longer to speak.”

“Excuse me?”

Kishiar’s words barely registered with Yuder, who was in a daze from the shock. It was only when Yuder finally managed a weak response that Kishiar chuckled softly.

“You look as if I’ve done something terrible to a child.”

“Terrible…”

Absent-mindedly echoing Kishiar’s words, a spark of understanding flashed in Yuder’s mind.

“What are you implying? Despite your ill health, do you still have the energy to jest?”

“Hmm, good. It seems your eyes have regained their focus.”

That’s more like Yuder. Kishiar, seemingly satisfied, narrowed his eyes as he responded nonchalantly.

“All right. The real problem isn’t with me. The reason I’m bringing this up now is that there’s one more thing we need to understand in order to move forward, based on the achievements we made yesterday.”

“And what would that be?”

“The reason why the Emperor hasn’t shown himself outside the Sun Palace for years.”

Speaking carelessly about the Emperor’s health was always strictly forbidden, considered highly confidential. Yuder began to wonder just how far Kishiar intended to share with him today.

“As everyone knows, His Majesty has been in ill health for some time now.”

“I’ve heard about his illness…”

“Yes, indeed. But when we met him in the Sun Palace, did he truly seem so seriously ill that he couldn’t possibly venture out anywhere?”

Yuder recalled the Emperor Keilusa he’d met at the Sun Palace. This young Emperor, resembling a sensitive scholar with glasses, didn’t seem so severely unwell that he couldn’t even attend a party within the palace, even though signs of illness were somewhat apparent.

One peculiar thing Yuder had noticed then was that the Emperor seemed to carry out his work and rest in one place only, without letting even his attendants or servants into the same space.

Invisible illness preventing him from going out, curious dialogues Kishiar has been dropping… Lost in thought, Yuder met Kishiar’s gaze.

“…I apologize if I’m jumping to conclusions, but are you suggesting that ‘the vessel’ you mentioned is the reason?”

“Correct.”

A soft compliment returned in a whisper.

“His Majesty’s vessel is currently cracked. He’s been trying to minimize movement to prevent the leakage of life force, but if he can’t find a way to mend it, he’ll eventually weaken rapidly until he reaches his limit. It’s similar to the situation I found myself in after the cracks started forming.”

“Do you mean…”

“Yes. We’re hoping that the power of the Red Stone might be the answer to restoring His Majesty’s health. More accurately, I am.”

It was then that Yuder started to understand the connection between the retrieval of the Red Stone and the actions of the Emperor and Kishiar thus far.

‘So that’s it. Kishiar, who was in the same situation, improved after awakening the power of the Red Stone. So, they’re hoping that by studying the retrieved stone, they might find a cure.’

They probably made the same decision in their past life too, although what followed must have been different from the present.

While seeking a cure for the Emperor by retrieving the Red Stone, Kishiars vessel was instead significantly damaged. What might they have thought then? They presumably succeeded in separating the stones power then as well, but Emperor Keilusa died quickly, and Kishiar, after becoming extremely weak, was assassinated.

‘Does that mean they failed to heal both the Emperor and Kishiar with the power of the separated stone in their previous lives?’

Or maybe some problem arose in the Pearl Tower where the research was carried out. Lost in thought, Yuder listened to Kishiar’s continuous words.

“It took quite a while to convince His Majesty, who had initially given up, and prepare to come here. After the vessel started to have serious issues, the time it takes to reach the point of no return varies from person to person. For me, it took about five years to reach my limit. However, it’s likely His Majesty has a shorter amount of time.”

Kishiar’s voice echoed gravely.

“After the experiment ended yesterday, I sent a letter to His Majesty to finalize the one-month period he had given. We’ll discuss the details later, but for now, consider it as if we’ve passed the test given by His Majesty.”

Had he done all of that while still bedridden due to his ill health? Catching Yuders questioning gaze, Kishiar continued with a slight, troubled smile playing on his face.

“A promise is a promise, isnt it? Regardless of how sick I get, I must fulfill my duties before I rest. Compared to my reckless assistant, I at least know my health is precious, so dont look at me that way.”

“…I havent said anything.”

Yuder quickly averted his gaze.

“It’ll be good news for Yulman, who’s outside.”

“Yes, his idea played a crucial role in this matter. If his brilliant idea had been mishandled, we all could have been in serious trouble.”

””

“In fact, since the time when Thais Yulman sent the mid-term report about this experimental plan, I’ve been communicating with His Majesty. His Majesty had said that if the experiment were

successful, he would let me take all priority in future research related to the Red Stone. He affirmed his promise in the response he sent this morning.”

“Thats fortunate.”

“Yes. When you told me in the carriage that it would be a waste to send the Red Stone to His Majesty without utilizing it I honestly didnt expect such an outcome.”

At Kishiars words, Yuder instinctively thought of Kanna. He had managed to fulfill his promise to Kishiar and enabled Kanna to properly interact with the Red Stone once again. However, she still hadnt woken up. A heaviness settled in his heart at the thought of her.

“Im worried about Kanna. She hasn’t woken up yet.”

“From what Nathan told me, both the doctor and the priestess said there were no major issues with her physical condition.”

“Ive heard that too. But if I had been more careful then”

As Yuders voice trailed off, he couldnt help but feel a pang of regret.

“Even if you had been more careful, the outcome might not have been different. You did the best you could at the time. You were the one who stopped the power of the Red Stone from exploding. So, by that logic, wouldn’t it be my responsibility for not properly protecting the members? When Kanna Wand wakes up, the one she should resent is me, not you.”

Yuder’s head snapped up at this.

“I didnt mean to imply that it was your fault, Commander.”

“I know.”

Kishiar’s response was soft, almost comforting.

“Don’t worry too much, let’s wait another day. If she still doesn’t wake up, I’ll find a way to wake her up.”

Coming from anyone else, these words might have felt like an empty promise, but when spoken by Kishiar, they oddly resonated like a powerful prophecy. Yuder felt his heavy heart lighten slightly, realizing he had been more tense about this than he had thought.

“…Thank you.”

“You mentioned before that you couldnt understand how you were able to stop the power of the Red Stone.”

Yuder recalled his conversation with Nathan last night and responded, “Yes.”

“At that time, I saw a red light, similar to the energy of the Red Stone, leaking from the glove you were wearing. The two lights seemed somewhat connected. How did you feel about it?”

“Connected… Im not sure about that.”

Yuder carefully recounted his memories of that moment, details he hadnt fully disclosed to Nathan Zuckerman.

“Given the urgent situation, I felt like I could somehow stop the stone from exploding. I reached out and the next thing I knew, I had done it.”

“It’s really fortunate nothing bad happened.”

“Yes.”

“No, I mean you.”

Thinking that he meant it was fortunate for everyone, Yuder was about to respond when Kishiar gently but firmly corrected him. Expecting to be reprimanded for his recklessness, Yuder fell silent as Kishiar paused.

After a few seconds of silence, Kishiar’s next words held a completely different meaning.

“…But if it hadnt been you, everyone might have been hurt.”

Yuder lifted his gaze that had unconsciously lowered to the floor. Kishiar was smiling, his eyebrows slightly furrowed.

“You did well.”

“I didnt expect you to compliment me.”

Taken aback, Yuder stuttered a reply, causing Kishiar to shake his head.

“While I’d prefer my members not to engage in life-threatening risks, we cant always avoid it. If it hadnt been you, the situation could have gotten out of control.”

You did well, Kishiar muttered. As Yuder met his gaze, his heart pounded unsteadily.

As Yuder found himself at a loss for words, Kishiar furrowed his brows a little more, reaching out to ruffle Yuder’s hair. Surprised, Yuder blinked a few times, and Kishiar’s hand brushed past his ear, returning to its original position.

‘What was that?’

Was there dust in his hair? As he stared blankly, Kishiar glanced at his hand and grumbled.

“Don’t let your guard down too much.”

“Pardon?”

“When someone who’s usually alert shows an unexpected response, it seems I have developed a disease where I unknowingly want to touch more.”

“…”

The uneasy feeling faded quickly.

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Yuder leaned back slightly in his chair, deftly steering the conversation back on track.

“Regardless, if there are any further developments or changes regarding yesterday’s incident, I will report to you immediately.”

“Please do.”

Although Yuder found Kishiar’s tiny smirk, indicative of an expected response, rather displeasing, he continually reminded himself of Kishiar’s poor health, striving to regain his composure.

“Speaking of which, did you hear why Thais Yulman is so insistent on meeting me first thing in the morning? He said he had something to say about the power of the Red Stone, so I thought I would listen to him later.”

“Ah, yes. That’s…”

The reason for Thais Yulman’s excited departure suddenly sprang to mind as he opened his mouth to reply without a second thought.

‘Right. I should have reported about Alik’s awakening first.’

He had forgotten, taken aback at the sight of Kishiar lying in bed.

“I apologize. I should have mentioned this sooner, but Alik became an Awakener this morning. That’s why Mr. Yulman sought you out.”

“The young mage who fainted yesterday? He became an Awakener?”

The news seemed to startle even Kishiar. Rising from the cushion, Kishiar questioned him with a serious face.

“Are you certain? What’s his ability?”

“I am certain from what I observed. He has the ability to summon water, and given that he couldn’t use elemental magic before, there doesn’t seem to be room for doubt.”

“If you saw it that way, then it must be certain.”

Accepting Yuder’s answer, Kishiar leaned back on the large cushion again.

“A mage awakener… I thought such a case might exist, but I never expected it to appear so close to home.”

“Mr. Yulman seemed to think that Alik’s awakening was due to the environment he was in, which was heavily exposed to the power of the Red Stone.”

“That makes sense. There was also the rise in the rate of awakenings among the imperial soldiers during the Red Stone retrieval operation.”

“I thought the same and informed him of this.”

Kishiar rubbed his chin lightly and nodded.

“Good job.”

“Mr. Yulman, after hearing the story, thought of a few new hypotheses linking that incident and this one. It might be best to discuss them once you’re feeling better.”

“I was planning to do that… But hearing you say this, it might be better to meet him right away.”

Before Yuder could protest, Kishiar had fully risen.

“I’m sorry, but could you bring me the clothes I left over there?”

“Commander, you don’t need to push yourself to meet him right away.”

“I’m fine. Talking with you seems to have healed me more than ten revitalizing incense sticks could. It was a conversation more invigorating.”

“What are you…”

“If you won’t bring them, I’ll just change myself. Or do you prefer to stand there and admire my body?”

Inspecting the body of an imperial family member could be punishable as a sacrilege, but I’ll allow it for you, Kishiar untied the string around his waist with a playful grin. Yuder averted his gaze from the suddenly exposed chest and silently moved toward the clothes Kishiar had requested.

A set of top and bottom clothes, seemingly prepared in anticipation of needing to change at any moment despite his poor health, were neatly placed in a noticeable spot along with a robe. Seeing this, he couldn’t help but question the truth behind the saying that Kishiar indeed knew how precious his body was.

“Fetch the undershirt and trousers first. The overcoat follows.”

As per his command, Yuder returned to the bed with the trousers and undershirt in hand, the overcoat slung over his arm.

“Is it alright if I do not assist you?”

He asked quietly, eyes lowered. A lighthearted chuckle responded.

“It’s fine. As I’ve said before, there’s no imperial family member who can dress himself as well as I. Yet, why do you avert your gaze even after I’ve said it’s alright?”

Rather than replying, Yuder chose to turn away immediately. Fortunately, Kishiar did not further engage in conversation, quickly changing into the clothing.

“Now hand me the overcoat.”

Upon hearing the command and turning around, Yuder saw Kishiar just buttoning the last button of his shirt. Yuder held up the overcoat he had draped over his arm, spreading it so Kishiar could slip his arms straight into it. Kishiar’s clothing felt surprisingly large, a testament to his larger-than-average stature. Kishiar turned around, a small, wry smile lifting the corner of his mouth as he raised an eyebrow.

“Even when I said it’s alright, you still help. I appreciate it.”

Once fully dressed and with his hair casually combed, he seemed in perfect condition save for a slightly paler complexion than usual.

“Let’s go now.”

Nathan Zuckerman, who had been standing near the dressing room entrance, seemed surprised at the sight of his lord swiftly emerging dressed. However, he quickly sighed and summoned Thais Yulman, who was still waiting outside.

“Commander! You’re finally awake. I’ve been waiting for so long.”

The old mage, unable to hide his excitement, exclaimed as he rushed in. Spotting Yuder behind Kishiar, he sent a brief glance of gratitude his way.

“Please hear my story. Amazingly, my apprentice Alik this morning…!”

“Hes an Awakener now, I heard.”

“Yes, that’s correct. But the important thing is not that…!”

Kishiar, with a nonchalant demeanor, managed to escort the excited mage to a sofa and patiently listened to his tale. Frankly, Yuder had difficulty understanding the phrases and terms that Thais rambled breathlessly, often skipping from one point to another. Yet, Kishiar seemed to comprehend it all.

“… so, if we can find a way to validate this theory, something incredible will happen.”

“If it happens as you say, indeed.”

“Do you think the same, Commander! Then the future research…!”

“Before that, I have something to address.”

At Kishiar’s firm tone, which broke off the conversation with a smile, Thais Yulman was momentarily taken aback. His excitement over the research seemed to cool down.

“While I have faith in your capabilities as a researcher and a mage, what’s most crucial in dealing with this matter is mutual trust and caution. Should I continue to entrust this task to someone whose greed and excitement, like yesterday, might get ahead of his reason, potentially bringing danger to all… I’ve been pondering this since last night.”

“Your Highness. That is…”

Thais Yulman, who changed his address in his haste, was silenced by a raised hand from Kishiar. The old mage felt crushed under the gaze of the young duke, much like a prey before a predator, and closed his mouth.

“I apologize. As soon as I saw you, I should have asked for forgiveness and promised there would be no recurrence, but in my excitement, I mistakenly prioritized.”

After he respectfully bowed his head in apology, he seemed to finally break free from the oppressive force that weighed him down.

“I hope there is no repetition of what happened yesterday. We will also change the location for future research. A new oath must be written, and we might need additional manpower for the research. Is that acceptable?”

“Of course, it’s acceptable. It… will ease our minds as well.”

“That’s good.”

A soft yet threatening smile briefly swept over his red eyes.

“We’ll discuss the details later. You may leave now.”

Thais Yulman promptly rose, said his farewell, and hastened out of the office. Yuder watched his retreating figure, apparently shell-shocked, and felt relieved that he probably wouldn’t be reckless as he had been before.

“Commander, then I shall also”

“Ah, you stay here a moment.”

Kishiar, who had been quietly watching the door until Thais Yulman disappeared, finally exhaled deeply and leaned back on the sofa.

“Nathan, bring that along with the water.”

‘That?’

Seeming to notice his puzzlement, Kishiar slightly opened his previously closed eyes. The gaze that had been so stern when dealing with Thais Yulman had entirely softened.

“You’ll understand once you see it. It’s for you.”

“Here you are.”

Nathan Zuckerman returned, placing a glass of ice water in front of Kishiar, and a paper bound with string in front of Yuder. After a moment of hesitation, Yuder untied the string and promptly read the written contents.

I, Cavalry Commander Kishiar La Orr, grant Assistant Yuder Aile the authority to continuously appoint five subordinates and allies directly under his command. Appointments are limited to Cavalry members and exclude anyone in a Deputy Commander position. Apart from this, it is left to Yuder Aile’s discretion.

No matter how many times he read it, the content was the same. It was an order giving him the power to have colleagues and subordinates to assist him in his work under Kishiar.

“Commander, this is”

“Didn’t I say I would reward you if you rested well for three days? Although there was an incident yesterday, I thought I should give it now, as a form of praise.”

He had promised a reward, but Yuder never expected it to be something like this. As Yuder blankly stared in surprise, unsure of the intention, Kishiar chuckled softly and waved his hand.

“You always strive to go beyond what you’re commanded. After some thought, I decided it would be better to give you extra hands to assist you.”

“I am fine without such authority.”

His objection was promptly overruled.

“You don’t have to decide immediately, just accept it for now. Also, there is actually another reward.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’ll find out when you return to your quarters from the medical division.”

You will probably like that one better, Kishiar mumbled, a mysterious smile on his face. Seeing this, a strange sense of unease stirred within Yuder.

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Chapter 188

“Did you see that final expression, Nathan?”

After Yuder Aile left, Kishiar, who had gulped down all his water in one go, exhaled deeply and broke into a faint laughter.

“One would typically be happy with two gifts, but I can’t figure out his expression. I nearly burst into laughter right in front of him. It’s a shame that I couldn’t see his face after he accepted them.”

Nathan refilled the mug once more while observing the Duke’s face which seemed extremely delighted.

“From what I saw, there was no change in his expression.”

“Really? You didn’t see his eyes rolling in worry, wondering what strange thing I might give him next?”

When did Yuder Aile ever show such a vulnerable expression? As per Nathan’s observations, Yuder, with a face far too stern for his age, had only stepped back from Kishiar’s words, consistently expressing an intention to refuse.

In response, Nathan maintained silence. Kishiar, having downed half the water Nathan had just poured, exhaled deeply and gently closed his eyes.

“It’s a relief in any case. Distracted by the gift, he left without asking the most sensitive question. To be honest, I thought he would ask up to that point.”

“…”

“But well, it’s an inevitable question if you think about it a little. He’ll be back soon.”

Kishiar did not explicitly state what it was, but Nathan, who had served him for a long time, knew the answer and did not question it. Essentially, the Duke had said he wouldn’t mind telling Yuder Aile everything, even the deepest and darkest secrets related to the imperial bloodline.

Among the nobility, they had speculated all there was to speculate over a long period, but it wasn’t the same for commoners. The word ‘truth’ was as dangerous as it was sweet.

“Are you really sure it’s okay?”

Nathan asked, almost unconsciously. Kishiar responded without opening his eyes.

“Do you think he will betray me when he hears the truth, Nathan?”

“…”

No, that’s why it seemed even more dangerous.

Considering Kishiar La Orr’s upbringing, he was an incredibly relaxed person, filled with the composure of a strong man, yet he wasn’t generous to everyone. Yuder Aile was the first one to gain his trust in such a short time, and also demonstrate an ability and loyalty worthy of that trust.

So, Nathan made a conscious effort to remember that the Cavalry had not even been formed for a year yet. If he didn’t, he feared he might get too familiar with him too quickly.

Even that balance was shaken in confusion when he saw the inexplicable face last night, who had said ‘you can keep doubting

me’ quite willingly.

“Nathan. As the days go by, I become more certain that I must make him entirely mine.”

Facing Nathan who was recalling the memories from last night, Kishiar spoke quietly.

“It might be the first time since I taught you the sword that I’ve wanted to keep someone this close to me.”

There was indeed value in Yuder Aile’s abilities. Every time Nathan recalled the precise judgment and immense power that Yuder displayed in the violently shaken space on the brink of explosion, he still got goosebumps. There could be no greater disaster than having such a person as an enemy. Especially when he heard that, unlike before, Yuder didn’t show the spreading of spots even after using such power last night.

“To gain something, one must first pay its price. The future I’m trying to forge needs such a unique card.”

His voice was unhurried, not unlike his usual tone, but Nathan discerned an unfamiliar longing in his lord. It was an uncharacteristic display for him, who typically never revealed deep regrets, no matter the circumstance.

“…Your aspiration to win hearts is admirable, but you mustn’t become overly consumed.”

“You’ve told me something similar before.”

Kishiar chuckled.

“Yes, I have. To be frank, I’ve been feeling a bit at risk lately. I never realized how difficult it was to maintain a proper distance from someone. Maybe this is a preference I never knew I had.”

“Is this not just the aftereffect of the second gender manifestation of Yuder Aile?”

“Well, that’s highly probable. He did look quite adorable today.”

Kishiar did not deny it. Nathan sighed a little at his lord’s playful response.

“What would His Majesty say if he heard you?”

“Do you think His Majesty would pay so much attention to my affairs?”

With a smile, Kishiar replied, then tilted his head and opened his eyes.

“Speaking of His Majesty, has a response arrived since he received it?”

“No, not yet… Ah, it just arrived.”

As if it had been waiting for the conversation to flow in this direction, a small courier bird pecked at the window with its beak. Nathan hurriedly opened the window and retrieved a small rolled-up letter from the pouch attached to the bird’s leg.

“Here it is.”

“Let’s see…”

With a small knife, Kishiar broke the seal on the letter and read it quickly while lounging.

“It seems he has received it. He doesn’t entirely trust the advice to keep the enclosed power of Red Stone as close to his body as possible, but he will likely heed it. Thankfully.”

“That’s good.”

Nathan also agreed with Kishiar's words. The previous night, following Kishiar's command, he separated half of the medium containing the power of the Red Stone and sent it to the Sun Palace. The power contained within the medium was no longer painful to touch or keep close, unlike when it was freely radiating within the Red Stone. As a result, it was transported secretly, unnoticed by anyone.

"Things are looking up. Although I sent it ahead just in case, it's quite something that a mage awakened this morning. I hope this power will also have a positive influence on His Majesty."

Kishiar looked toward the masonry heater where he'd hidden the basket containing the other half.

"That said… I'm feeling so languid. I really need to rest all day."

"Isn't that because your cycle is nearing?"

"Hmm… it seems a bit too much to attribute it to the cycle."

"You also used your power suddenly yesterday."

"That's true, there's that."

"You even mentioned having a bad dream this morning."

"Ah, I did say that. I can't remember it well now, but it was truly an unpleasant dream."

As Kishiar lightly clenched and unclenched his hand, he mumbled. Each time, four different colored energies within his hand entwined, showed themselves, and then dispersed with a flickering sound.

To anyone watching, it would've been a fascinating display of power. However, the red eyes that were witnessing the spectacle

were filled with nothing but discomfort and fatigue.

“Perhaps the heat period has arrived earlier than anticipated.”

“Pardon?”

“Nevermind. I’m heading back now. You should carry on with your duties, Nathan.”

Kishiar, having risen from his seat, moved toward his bedroom. Nathan bowed his head respectfully toward his lord’s receding figure and then turned away.

—

“Sir Yuder. You’ve arrived just in time. Lady Kanna has regained consciousness.”

Upon descending to the first-floor Medical Division, Yuder immediately quickened his pace at the good news shared by the rushing Lusan.

“When did she wake up?”

“Not long after the mages left to tidy up the basement, she opened her eyes. She has now consumed a bowl of thin soup and we’ve infused her with more divine power.”

“Thank you.”

Expressing his sincere gratitude, Yuder quickly spotted Kanna sitting up in bed. She seemed lost in deep thought, her eyes vacant as she stared down.

“Kanna.”

“…Ah, Yuder.”

At the sound of her name, she managed a faint smile and waved her hand.

“You said I fainted? I was so surprised when I woke up because I didn’t remember a thing.”

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine. A little low on energy, but I feel refreshed, like after a good night’s sleep.”

Her honesty was truly a relief. Yuder let out a soft sigh as he took a seat beside her bed.

“I suppose my sudden fainting must have surprised everyone. What did the Commander say? Was he very disappointed?”

“There’s no reason for him to be.”

Kanna finally smiled with her usual warmth at his firm reply.

“Yes, you’re right. I knew that, but I couldn’t help worrying.”

“Do you remember what happened when you used your ability before fainting?”

Yuder asked the most important question. Kanna’s smile faded, and she lowered her head slightly.

“No, I don’t remember clearly. Other than the feeling of being bounced off something as soon as I used it…”

As expected, even though she used her ability, she couldn’t recall any retrieved information. But the phrase ‘bounced off’ was a bit unusual, prompting Yuder to ask about it again.

“Being bounced off, you said?”

“Yeah. How should I put it? It was like trying to see a gigantic mountain inside a small stone, and that was something no, it was like trying to see something not permitted to a human.”

“I don’t understand.”

Yuder shook his head; he honestly had no idea what she meant. Kanna gave a small laugh.

“To be honest, I don’t understand either, even while I’m saying it. It was such a strange experience, the first time I’ve felt something like that.”

Was it simply because Kanna’s ability wasn’t advanced enough to read the stone, or was it truly something beyond human comprehension? It was hard to tell, but regardless, Yuder felt content that she had woken up unharmed.

“Well, if you’re not injured, let’s watch for another day before going back. I will tell the Commander.”

“Hm? No, I’m fine. What for? I want to go back now.”

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Chapter 189

“I think I just want to go back now.”

At that moment, Enon returned, casting a glance at Yuder, his brows slightly furrowed. It seemed that the lingering tension from their morning conversation had not completely dissolved yet. Yuder secretly wished that Enon would tell Kanna to rest a bit more, but such an occurrence didn’t happen.

“If you wish to leave now, you may. Your condition is stable.”

“Really? That’s a relief.”

Leaving behind words of caution to revisit should any problem arise, Enon left the room with a sullen expression. As Kanna got up and started preparing to leave, Yuder swiftly followed Enon, catching him by the shoulder.

“What is it?”

“Come by my quarters later. There’s something I want to talk about.”

“Didn’t I tell you not to command me around, even if you know a bit about me?”

“It’s about what happened in the basement yesterday.”

At these words, Enon’s angry eyebrows relaxed slightly. He must have been genuinely curious.

“Hmm…”

“I’ll have lemons ready.”

“Do you think just having lemons will do it? What exactly did you learn from wherever you’ve been?”

Regardless of Enon’s grumbling, Yuder informed him about the location of his quarters before leaving the infirmary with Kanna.

“Yuder. That handsome apothecary in the medical division…”

As they traversed the quiet corridor and ascended the central staircase, Kanna suddenly started talking about Enon. Yuder took a moment before slowly responding.

“Hmm?”

“Doesn’t he seem a bit… unusual?”

“In what way?”

For a moment, Yuder wondered if Kanna had overheard his conversation with Enon, but it didn’t seem likely. Kanna continued, her face thoughtful as she climbed the stairs.

“Well, when I woke up earlier, I really looked at his face for the first time, and something strange happened.”

“A strange feeling?”

“Remember when I told you that I’ve been training recently to faintly sense other people’s emotions and feelings? Do you remember?”

Yuder remembered her mentioning it when they went to interrogate Gayle and Doyle.

“I can’t completely control this ability yet, so it can be draining. But the moment he saw me, he told me that if I don’t learn to control it, my body will quickly deteriorate. I haven’t told anyone else about this ability except you and the Commander. How could he know?

He’s definitely not an ordinary apothecary. Shouldn’t we investigate?”

“…”

‘…I guess I have one more thing to talk about with Enon.’

Enon still seemed to struggle with knowing what should and should not be said to others. Yuder was left pondering how to resolve this situation.

“Hey, Kanna.”

“Hmm?”

“That apothecary… I mean, Enon, he’s actually someone I know.”

“What? Really? Was he introduced by you?”

“Not exactly, but…”

Yuder trailed off, watching Kanna’s expression closely.

“In concern for you, because you were unconscious for so long, I discussed your ability in a bit more detail with him. I’m sorry.”

“Oh… I see.”

Finally, the suspicion and surprise that filled Kanna’s face subsided.

“I even imagined he might be a spy who detected an ability I hadn’t mentioned. So, he knows you… was he someone you knew from your hometown?”

“No, it was someone I met here after coming. It happened coincidentally… I received a bit of help, and that’s how the bond formed.”

It wasn’t in this life, but it had been in the previous one. Hence, it was not a complete lie.

“Really? You, receiving help?”

Kanna seemed genuinely surprised, as if she had never even considered the possibility that Yuder might need assistance from someone. Nevertheless, her guard against Enon seemed to soften considerably with his words.

“You must have met someone truly skilled, then. I apologize if I misunderstood.”

Unable to reveal the truth that her suspicions were, in fact, reasonable, Yuder simply responded with an ambiguous silence. Just then, they reached the floor where their lodging was located, and the two exchanged brief pleasantries, the central staircase between them.

“Yuder. You still have one more day off, right? Would you mind attending training with me tomorrow?”

“That’s fine, but… I think it would be better for you to rest a bit more.”

Continuous training certainly aids in enhancing skills, but it’s not worth pushing oneself to exhaustion. In response to Yuder’s concern, Kanna shook her head.

“No. After this incident, I realized that compared to the Commander or you, Yuder, I still have a long way to go. I’m ashamed of my previous arrogance, so I’ll work harder. See you tomorrow!”

As Kanna turned and sprinted away, her retreating figure soon disappeared around the corridor. Yuder slowly turned and headed down the opposite corridor to his own quarters. Before opening the

door, he paused, remembering Kishiar's words that there was one more gift, but he had to go in nonetheless.

What would the second gift be? He turned the doorknob with a subtle sense of unease, revealing his usual small room. What he discovered while cautiously surveying the room was a set of white clothes neatly laid out on the bed. Yuder instantly recognized the familiar outfit.

"…A ceremonial suit?"

It was definitely the ceremonial suit he had worn on the day of the manifestation. He hadn't paid any attention to the missing ceremonial dress since he had already changed into different clothes by the time he had regained his senses, but he hadn't expected it to return here.

"Could this be the second gift?"

Kishiar had said that he would probably prefer the second gift, but he wasn't particularly thrilled about getting his suit back. As he picked up the suit with a strange feeling, Yuder stopped as he noticed a few objects that had rolled out from the folds of the garment onto the bed.

One of them was a round object wrapped in brightly colored paper, its identity uncertain. However, the other was unmistakable. A fist-sized piece of stone, glowing a dark red, was unquestionably the medium of the Red Stone power that Thais Yulman had created the night before.

"This is……"

He cautiously reached out and grasped the small stone. Despite being shattered, the medium holding the power of the Red Stone possessed an odd allure, much like a top-quality gemstone. Unlike when it was the Red Stone, it was now quiet even when held in

hand. After setting it back down, Yuder unwrapped the second object in the colored paper.

What could be worthy to be placed next to the medium of the Red Stone's power?

Fifth generation store in the center of the Fifth Wall district. The Candy Store of New Bellaria.

A taste sweeter than love. Now share it as a gift.

"…"

Inside the colored paper wrapping lay objects no larger than a fingernail little candies. Yuder silently looked down at the clusters of candies that shone like jewels in various colors, eventually picking up one and placing it in his mouth. From the ruby-red candy came a sweet taste so intense, it made him wonder if it was his tongue melting.

'I suppose… I have to admit…'

Yuder covered the candy wrapper again and lifted up the artifact, bringing it close to his eyes.

'This one certainly appeals to me more than the first gift.'

The reason Kishiar had given it to Yuder was because it didn't matter how he scrutinized or used the artifact, as long as its power was worth one artifact. By giving away part of that dangerous power without any conditions, Kishiar was sending the most certain message that his trust in Yuder had not changed. It was indeed a daring distribution.

A fleeting smile rose and vanished from the face reflected faintly on the surface of the artifact. Yuder, feeling satisfied, stashed the artifact in his bosom and stood up.

There was no time to rest; he had things to prepare before Enon arrived.

He went down to the dining room and picked up some bread for himself and a few lemons for Enon. After tidying up the uniform that the cleaning staff had laundered for him and checking the state of the room, his long-awaited guest finally knocked on the door after finishing all of his day's work.

"All the room locations here are confusing. There's no name on the doors, and when all the colors are exactly the same, even the owner would have a hard time finding the room."

"It's deliberately designed that way to make it hard for intruders if they come in. Come in."

After answering him, using memories from his past life, he went in first, with Enon grumbling quietly and following him.

"So, what exactly happened yesterday?"

"It's a bit of a long story."

Despite being a small room, it had everything. Upon seeing the lemons washed and laid out on the small table, Enon's expression softened significantly.

"Alright. Start talking."

Explaining what had happened the night before wasn't that difficult. It was just an unexpected accident during an experiment to separate the power from the stone for the purpose of researching the power of the Red Stone.

However, explaining the mysterious situation that had occurred between the power of the Red Stone and him at the time of the accident was rather difficult. To talk about his hand that had emitted

light, he had to reveal the circumstances under which the spot had formed, but it was tricky to explain without violating his oath since it happened during a secret mission.

So, Yuder carefully continued his story using incidents before and after the mission that wouldn't violate his oath, allowing Enon to infer the gaps. He believed Enon could make an educated guess about the missing parts, but the only response from Enon, who was casually eating through the tough lemon peel as if it were pudding, was an occasional non-committal "Hmm."

"…and that's what happened."

Finally, the story came to an end, and his mouth felt dry from all the talking.

"Hmm. I see. Now I understand a bit more."

Enon, having polished off two lemons, squinted his eyes and twisted the corners of his mouth into a smile.

"So, what's the opinion you want from me?"

"I want to know what you think about what happened to me during the experiment yesterday."

"You say you don't know, and you want to know if I know, right?"

"You've lived for a long time."

"Even though I've lived for a long time, the fact that the Red Stone fell two years ago hasn't changed. I never really cared about you Awakeners in the first place."

Although he spoke those words, Enon's gaze was serious. Lost in thought, he held the third lemon in his hand and rolled it rhythmically.

“The power of the Red Stone is all about change…”

“…”

Enon mumbled something under his breath as if he had caught on to what Thais Yulman had said, and he tilted his head, his throat letting out a dry, hollow sound.

“So, you were talking about the magic revolution and all that in that context. That arrogant young mage. How audacious.”

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Chapter 190

If the saying that Enon lived for a long time is true, then he could treat Thais Yulman, an old man, like a child. But actually seeing that in front of his eyes made him feel strange.

“Well, the story you told me is interesting in itself. Since there are many gaps and I haven’t seen it with my own eyes, it’s difficult to say anything just by listening.”

“That…”

“Well, as long as you belong somewhere, I know you can’t just say everything you want. I can roughly tell that you have various restrictions.”

While excluding the parts that couldn’t be discussed, some parts inevitably had to be condensed in order to speculate on the cause through unrelated events. Since the change in the spot on the back of the hand and last night’s experiment were the important things, Enon seemed to pay little attention to other details.

“I’m sorry I can’t give you the answer you were expecting, but there is something that came to mind while listening. Should I tell you that?”

“Anything is fine.”

“Let’s assume that the old mage was right, and just a slight exposure to the power of the Red Stone can transform a person into an Awakener. It sounds good in theory, but in reality, you could think of it as a poison. A small amount can be a medicine, but if used in large quantities, it becomes a poison. There are plenty of materials in this world that become toxic when used in large quantities.”

Although Yuder didn’t know why he chose to compare it to poison, Yuder could relate to the feeling, so Yuder decided to continue listening to his words.

“If the cause of the spot on the back of your hand is indeed the power of the Red Stone, it might be better to understand what happened afterward as an attempt to poison someone who is immune to a specific poison. Even if you’re immune, it takes a very long time to fully recover once a lethal dose of poison is injected. The more dangerous the poison, the longer it takes.”

“…An attempt to poison.”

Yuder repeated his words softly. It felt strange because he had a physical body that was immune to naturally occurring toxins and didn’t suffer any harm from them.

“The same goes for divine power. It doesn’t recover easily. A body immune to poison is no different from a living poison in that it can’t be completely eliminated. So detoxification doesn’t mean completely eliminating the poison from the body, but rather weakening it and then helping to absorb it so that the body becomes more toxic. That’s what it means to be ‘recovered’ from poison. Do you understand what I mean?”

“To some extent.”

“Consider a body that has been constantly trying to assimilate and tame that powerful toxic power, which is like concentrated poison, as its own after digesting the power of the Red Stone. If it has succeeded to some extent, what do you think will happen?”

Yuder remained silent for a moment before opening his mouth.

“Does that mean my body has become like that?”

“I don’t know. It’s just my thought.”

Enon shrugged his shoulders in response.

“As someone who has been running an apothecary for a long time, I thought about it while listening to your story. The second gender manifestation is an event where the body undergoes a significant transformation, just like the awakening itself. And you survived that transformation with poison in your body. Moreover, your energy has become more stable since yesterday.”

“It’s not poison, but power, I suppose.”

“Well, well.”

Enon mumbled absentmindedly as he looked at the lemon in his hand.

“If you have succeeded in absorbing or assimilating that power to some extent, you might be considered a living medium… No, no different from the Red Stone itself. Or maybe by adding the essence to your original power, you could become several times stronger than before.”

“…”

It seemed like a wild guess, but there was a strange sense of reason behind it.

If I felt like I could touch the power of the Red Stone with my own power… Then maybe the origin of the spreading spot that caused pain in my body wasn’t like a festering wound, but the original power of the Red Stone gradually entering and expanding within my body.

While contemplating this thought, Yuder continued to gaze at his right hand wrapped in a glove, while Enon’s voice kept echoing in his ears.

“If you think that way, there might be some reason to speculate why your energy is fluctuating like that. Since you suddenly accepted such a powerful force and have been fighting against it, do you think the foundation might remain intact?”

“I don’t think I’ve been in such a bad condition to the point where it’s dangerously unstable.”

“That’s because your constitution is so good. If you were like the others here, you would have already been unable to endure and died.”

“…Good constitution?”

With a perplexing compliment, Yuder tilted his head and asked. In response, Enon frowned deeply.

“Enough. Don’t keep making me hear compliments like that.”

He was about to deny that such a thing existed, but Enon had already flexed his arm and stood up abruptly.

“I think I’ve heard enough for now.”

“Enon, wait a moment.”

“What now?”

Seeing Enon’s sharp fangs exposed as he turned around, it seemed like it would be better not to hold him back any further. Yuder remained silent for a moment, then picked up a lemon from the untouched table and handed it to Enon.

“Take this too. I won’t eat it.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Today, it felt like I was the only one who kept listening, so next time, feel free to ask me anything. If I can answer, I’ll tell you everything.”

Including about my previous life.

Sensing the underlying meaning, Enon narrowed his eyes for a moment before turning away.

“Fine. Got it.”

He put the two lemons in his pocket and swiftly disappeared without giving Yuder a chance to say goodbye.

It’s almost as if he joined the Cavalry just to watch over me.

Yuder sighed deeply and sat down on the road.

Come to think of it, although Enon wasn’t a member of the Cavalry, he belonged to the same unit. Could he be considered as an ally? Even though he didn’t specify, if there was a need to ask for help, Yuder planned to shamelessly seek him out. But it would be better to get closer before making any immediate proposals.

He might dislike it if I propose right away… I should wait until we become a bit closer and find an opportunity.

—

The next day, as soon as Yuder woke up, he finished his meditation and went out to the training ground behind the accommodations. Even though it was morning, enthusiastic soldiers had already gathered for individual training.

“Yuder!”

Among them, Gakane, who was running around the training ground with a noticeable shadow clone, spotted Yuder and rushed

over with a bright face to greet him.

“Are you completely released from the medical division now?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s great. Maybe it’s because of the hard work you put in all this time, but it seems like you’ve lost some weight. Did you have breakfast?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“That’s good. Let’s train together today!”

Yuder nodded slightly to indicate that he had eaten, and Gakane lightly patted his back, sporting a smile. His face was so refreshing that it made him momentarily forget the fact that he was drenched in sweat. At the same time, Yuder felt a slight release of the energy that had been surrounding Gakane’s body, making him realize once again that he had manifested a second gender.

Come to think of it… Gakane is also an Alpha.

The energy that he couldn’t feel before his second gender manifestation was probably the presence of Gakane as an Alpha. It wasn’t as overwhelming or tense as when facing Kishiar’s energy, but it definitely made him aware that Gakane was a being with a different nature than himself.

When he manifested as an Omega without a scent in his previous life, he had been completely dull to his own scent as well as the scents and energies of others who had second gender manifestation. He had hardly ever experienced this kind of sensation.

Manifesting with a distinct scent definitely feels different.

“Why are you looking at me like that? Did something get on my face?”

As Yuder thought about it, he must have been staring too intensely because Gakane wiped his forehead and cheek with a bewildered expression. Of course, there was nothing on him except sweat.

“No, it’s just that after the manifestation, I can clearly feel that you are different from me.”

Gakane widened his eyes in surprise at the honest answer, then burst into laughter.

“Haha, you’re only realizing that now? It’s interesting to see that Yuder has some areas of inexperience.”

After saying that, he advised Yuder that he would start experiencing that sensation quite frequently from now on, and warned him to stay away from Alpha members who exude a strong scent right before their heat.

“I know from my own experience that the emotions of an Alpha Awakener in heat can become intense. According to the rules set by the Commander, as soon as the heat comes, it’s mandatory isolation and leave, so there probably won’t be many chances for encounters… But it’s always good to be cautious and avoid any harm from both sides.”

“Gakane, have you ever met an Omega Awakener during their heat?”

Suddenly curious, Yuder asked, and Gakane casually shook his head.

“No, I haven’t. I saw an Omega Awakener for the first time only after joining the Cavalry. But even if the heat comes, I don’t have any

intention to meet someone within the unit, so I'll take my leave and just rest."

It was indeed an exemplary answer. Yuder recalled the incidents of promiscuity within the unit caused by individuals who would use the heat as an excuse during his time as the Commander. Even though there were sleeping scents and calming medicines prepared to spend the heat comfortably, there were always those who wanted to undermine the discipline within the unit.

'Some of them even snuck into my bedroom, claiming they could suppress the scentless Omega Commander with their scents'

Those culprits had vanished only after he'd beaten them until all their limbs and d*cks were broken and then hung them upside down on the barrack roof. However, the rebellion continued every now and then, arguing about how a half-wit who never experienced a heat period could oppress them.

While recalling bitter memories, Yuder took out two papers he had prepared in advance from his lodging and stuck them on the nearby wall.

"Yuder, what's this? A plan?"

"It's the revised training schedule for the Cavalry from now on."

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Chapter 191

“The upcoming new training schedule for the Cavalry.”

“You can’t possibly have made this…?”

Gakane read the text written on the paper, his eyes wide as if he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. Until now, the training the Cavalry members had undergone consisted of only basic physical exercises and integrated training for each unit. Despite each individual having unique abilities, it had been difficult for anyone to train solely for their own benefit. A large number of them didn’t even know how to go about it.

Now, with a rise in those who had completed general education and writing classes that took more of their time than training, and the status of the Cavalry having grown incomparably higher than before, it was the perfect time to change the training schedule.

Consequently, Yuder had spent nearly all of the previous night formulating the training schedule he had been considering for some time. He first wrote out a basic individual training schedule, built upon his experiences from his previous life. Then, he grouped together about ten individuals, regardless of their units, according to the abilities he had observed in them so far. He purposely grouped those with similar or complementary abilities in order to create relationships that could aid in individual training.

Essentially, the members would spend their day conducting personal training similar to what Yuder had done in his previous life. However, the main focus of this schedule was to provide a regular time for comrades to gather, observe, and assist each other to improve their abilities.

“I’ve already secured permission from the Commander.”

“When did you have the time to think of all this? You’ve been so busy running around… And there’s even an examination?”

Gakane, who had been reading the schedule with his mouth agape, paused at a certain part. It was the section that mentioned a simple ability test under the Deputy Commander’s supervision once a month to assess the development of abilities and diligence.

“Do we really need this?”

“Examinations are absolutely necessary. There are many people who won’t make a move without a goal.”

Moreover, the accumulated exam results could serve as a great standard when selecting and promoting necessary talents for the Cavalry in the future. So it was indeed essential.

“I suppose you’re right…”

As Gakane nodded and read on, other members who had been conducting physical training nearby gradually gathered behind them.

“What’s this? A new training schedule?”

“Yuder made it? If we follow this, can we become as strong as him?”

“Wow. It seems similar to before, but entirely different. It’s systematic, but I’m not confident if I can keep up.”

“Twenty minutes of meditation right after waking up? Is it true that this helps accumulate and preserve power?”

The reactions were a mix of concern and fascination, but they were generally positive.

Yuder ascended, leaving the murmuring members behind. Less than half a day later, all the Cavalry members had read the new

schedule. The members, having gained confidence while guarding the capital during the festival period, were currently striving hard, fueled by the desire to become stronger. They warmly welcomed the new systematic training plan.

“Yuder. I saw the new schedule! It’s amazing. Those who are training with me will gather in the second-floor lounge after the writing class ends in the afternoon. Come over! See you there.”

Kanna, who Yuder ran into while heading down for lunch, excitedly whispered and left, waving her hand. It was fortunate that she was behaving as usual, as if her earlier collapse had never happened.

Yuder headed to the lounge at the time Kanna had mentioned. The majority of those gathered had not had any personal conversations with anyone apart from Kanna and Gakane. However, such facts were no obstacle in front of their fervor for gaining strength.

“Yuder Aile is here!”

As soon as Yuder arrived, the members who had shouted loudly flocked to his side, raising their voices in a clamorous chatter.

“Yuder! They say your training skills are exceptional, right? Can you tell me how I should train?”

“I’m not sure if my training method is right. Can you watch once and give me some advice?”

“I, I also want to…”

Among them were some who hadn’t shown much enthusiasm in their previous lives. Remembering the dull times when they were solely focused on their own safety while working, the sight of their

younger colleagues brimming with passion felt both regrettable and heartwarming.

Yuder took his time to slowly recommend a training method suitable for each person's skill development. He had thought that at least one person might feel offended receiving advice from Yuder, a fellow member, but that was a misconception.

What had initially been a gathering of fewer than 20 people exploded uncontrollably after the rumor spread that Yuder Aile was giving training advice. Eventually, he had to attend to those who came asking, even skipping dinner.

The last day of the non-holiday holiday disappeared in the blink of an eye.

"Yuder. It seems like no more people will come. Let's get up."

Gakane, who had been by Yuder's side all day helping organize the members with his shadow clone, approached him with a tired face, looking out the window at the setting sun.

"Sorry. It seems I asked for your help today for nothing. I didn't expect this crowd…"

Kanna, who had been equally worn out by his side, apologized.

"I'm fine."

However, just as they were about to get up, the door opened again and someone poked their head in, making the prospect of returning to their lodging seem dubious again.

"Would it be possible to still receive advice?"

"Ever?"

Kanna’s eyes widened at the appearance of an unexpected person. The latecomer was Ever, Deputy Commander of Shin Division.

“I didn’t expect you to come, Ever.”

“I’ve been so busy all day that I just heard about it. If it’s over, I’ll just go.”

“Please, have a seat.”

Yuder responded coolly and sat down. Here was Ever Beck, an excellent member who had developed her abilities well in her previous life, seeking advice. It struck him vividly that it was indeed 11 years prior.

“I’m glad. I won’t take up much of your time.”

Ever sat down in front of Yuder, taking slow breaths. Her cheeks were still red, as if she had run hastily.

“Like everyone else, I’ve been worrying about how to set my personal training direction. So far, I’ve been focusing on enhancing the abilities I already have, but I’m worried if that alone will be sufficient.”

“You’re already doing well enough, but if you think that’s not sufficient, what do you think is missing?”

“Hmm. Well… I feel like I’m only using my power in a way that distributes it too lightly. That’s the tendency. You all know my abilities, right?”

Ever lightly shook her gloved hand, revealing her exposed fingers. Her strength lay in physical power and skin strength, which might make it odd to suggest she could divide her power. However, for Yuder, who could perceive the flow of energy, it was different. The

faint energy gathering at the tips of Ever's fingers in an instant was the core of the strength she could exert. So small it would be unnoticeable without intense focus, but a precisely calculated force momentarily lingered at her fingertips before dispersing again.

"I think this power is wonderful, of course. But lately, when I look at others, I sometimes think I might need an ability to make a big impact. So, I thought it would be good if I could improve that through training… My explanation is a bit strange, isn't it? I'm sorry. I'm not used to explaining things like this."

"No, it's fine."

In essence, Ever was wondering if it might be better to develop a method to use power that stands out and is flashy, like others.

'It's a common trap to fall into. The grass is always greener.'

Based on his past experiences, Yuder understood Ever's thoughts. But understanding her did not mean he wanted to support her in this line of thinking.

'There's no need to accentuate a weakness when you have a good ability.'

Yuder remembered how Ever, in her previous life, had single-handedly jumped into a horde of about 100 monsters and took them all down in an instant. It was ironic to think that the best user of powers he had met, someone who could wield their ability with precision, had at one point considered training to go in the complete opposite direction. He almost laughed at the thought.

"I wouldn't do that, Ever," Yuder advised her in a quiet but firm tone.

"Your ability is far more amazing than those who constantly waste their energy. If I were you, I would continue as you have been, while

increasing your courage and adaptability for close combat.”

Ever’s power was mighty, but had the disadvantage of not having the same effect on the target when used from a distance. Her ability was most effective when used in conjunction with close combat.

“So, is that so? Was I just being too greedy?”

Ever scratched her head with an awkward expression, prompting Kanna to nod.

“It’s not that you’re greedy, it’s just that your ability is so great. Out of all the people who came today, you’re the first one Yuder has spoken so highly of!”

“Really…?”

While Ever seemed genuinely happy but a little bewildered, it seemed as if she hadn’t fully grasped the potential of her power. But with time, she would undoubtedly come to understand it on her own, without the need for anyone else’s advice. Watching her, Yuder suddenly thought that he might be the one needing advice.

‘When I think about it, what I really need now is an ability like Ever’s.’

The red spots caused by the power of the Red Stone hadn’t disappeared yet. He was in a situation where he couldn’t freely use his power like before, and had already been thinking of finding a more delicate way to divide and use it. And what better teacher to learn from than the master of such an ability?

Someone who was born to use a very small, precise amount of power at just the right place.

“Ever.”

“Yes?”

“Would you teach me how to use your power?”

“Are you joking?”

Ever, along with Gakane and Kanna, wore a surprised expression, seemingly unable to guess Yuder’s reasoning. However, Yuder was serious.

“Uh Im not sure if I can be of help. Yuder, youre already so powerful, what could I possibly teach you?”

“It’s alright. Just showing me how you use it will be enough. Is that not possible?”

“Its not that its impossible”

That was enough for him. Yuder had managed to secure a promise to meet her during the morning free training time, and he was as satisfied as a well-fed beast. It was, without doubt, the greatest harvest he’d gained from this holiday.

Afterward, Ever left with Kanna, looking somewhat flustered. Gakane offered to help Yuder finish the cleanup, but Yuder insisted he go ahead, as he seemed quite tired.

The recreation room was left with only a few pieces of litter and chairs strewn about, as if to reflect the noisy bustle of the day. Yuder picked up the trash and moved the chairs back to their original positions. As he pushed the last remaining chair towards the table and turned around, a voice echoed from the direction of the door without warning.

“I didnt tell you to rest just so you could be this busy, you know.”

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Chapter 192

“Commander.”

When had he arrived? The sudden presence caught Yuder by surprise, but that feeling quickly dissipated as Kishiar approached.

“I’ve watched and listened to what you’ve been up to all day today. You truly didn’t rest even for a moment.”

“I did rest. It wasn’t particularly strenuous.”

“Since when did ‘not strenuous’ and ‘resting’ mean the same thing?”

“Did you perhaps come because you’re displeased with the new training plan proposal I announced today?”

“Why would that be the case? On the contrary, you did it too well; that’s the problem.”

With a small smile and a subtle furrowing of his eyebrows, Kishiar gently settled onto the edge of the long table.

“I’m really worried. What am I to do with my assistant who doesn’t even know how to rest?”

“You don’t need to do anything. Should you really be out like this just after a day, Commander?”

“If you’re worried, would you rest with me in the bedroom like yesterday?”

He responded with an insinuation that Kishiar, who hardly even sleeps and is always working, wasn’t in a position to advise him.

However, Kishiars comeback was even more pointed.

“When did we rest together?”

“Having a pleasant conversation in the bedroom without doing anything else is generally referred to as resting.”

“There’s a nice phrase called ‘sickroom visit.’”

Furthermore, didn’t their conversation mainly revolve around work? As he retorted sharply, Kishiar chuckled.

“You’re right. I’ve lost this round.”

Despite declaring his defeat, the energy radiating from him was cheerful and gentle. Yuder forcefully pulled his gaze away from Kishiars captivating face and opened his mouth.

“You surely didn’t come all the way down here just to joke. Why are you here?”

“I was curious whether you received the second gift I left at your quarters.”

Kishiar finally got to the point. Recalling the red medium in his possession, he nodded.

“Yes, I’ve confirmed it.”

It was a gift beyond Yuders wildest expectations. How could he possibly articulate the surprise he felt when he saw it yesterday? Kishiar’s face, too, bore a satisfied smile as he noticed Yuders faint smile and brightened eyes.

“Did you like it? I thought you would.”

“Yes, I’m truly thankful for your…”

“I had two knights from the Peletta order in the capital waiting in turn to buy that new product. It’s not accepting reservations, you see.”

“Pardon?”

Interrupting my thanks, his unexpected words caused me to forget what I was saying.

“Though it’s made from fruit, no one has yet discovered the secret to its beautiful color and taste. It truly deserves to be called one of the capital’s specialties. I’m glad that it suited your taste as well. It makes giving it as a gift worthwhile.”

“Are you talking about… candy?”

“Hm? The only gift I gave was that, did you receive something else?”

Faced with his natural smile, Yuder blinked for a moment before exhaling a long breath.

‘So, he’s keeping the fact that he gave me the medium officially a secret.’

Even though no one was around, you never know who might be listening in on people’s affairs. It couldn’t hurt to be careful.

“No, I didn’t. I will enjoy it.”

“There’s no need to savor it too much, but you can’t eat it all in one day either. If you eat too much, it’ll rot your teeth. So, you’re only allowed to have up to five a day.”

“Yes.”

Indeed, it was somewhat unnerving to receive affectionate advice in an exaggerated manner as if he was a child, but what could be

done? At this moment, Kishiar was the Commander, and Yuder was his assistant.

Upon hearing Yuder's awkward response, Kishiar burst into a vibrant smile, dusted off his seat, and rose.

"Shall we have a late dinner now?"

"Have you not eaten yet?"

"You haven't either."

While it was simply that Yuder had skipped dinner because of advising the members, it was a mystery why Kishiar, who had no such obligation, had not eaten yet.

'Has Nathan Zuckerman left the place?'

"I understand. But the cafeteria might already be closed."

"There's no need to eat within the quarters. There are plenty of eateries outside."

Kishiar casually responded and nonchalantly adjusted the bracelet around his wrist. His face and hair blurred momentarily, transforming into an unremarkable brown hair and faint facial features.

In retrospect, he was not in Cavalry attire from the start. Only then did Yuder realize with a hint of disappointment that Kishiar had planned this from the beginning.

"You certainly came well-prepared."

"I tend to be meticulous."

Kishiar cheerfully took Yuder's comment and extended his hand with a jovial expression.

“We’ve been working without a break since this morning, shouldn’t we relax over dinner? Let me show you what it means to rest. Let’s go.”

There was not even a hint of room for refusal. Considering he hadn’t planned to leave the Cavalry today, it was somewhat of a relief that he hadn’t put on the conspicuous black Cavalry outerwear. Yuder hurriedly followed Kishiar, who strode out as if he could fly.

The nightlife inside the 7th wall after the harvest festival was quieter than before, but the ambiance seemed somewhat brighter. Kishiar, who had easily pierced through all sorts of shortcuts within the Imperial Knight Headquarters, was now effortlessly blending into the common folk in the streets.

Yuder, trailing behind him, suddenly tuned into a conversation of drunkards passing by.

“Maybe, they reclaimed the body because of the incident at the Apeto family’s…”

“The funeral got canceled. Are they never going to hold it?”

“We common folks can’t possibly understand the inner workings of the high and mighty, but that third son was truly exceptional…”

‘Ah. They’re talking about the incident at the funeral of Lenore Shand Apeto.’

Yuder was shocked that the news had spread so widely, even though he had heard it directly from Kishiar, who was responsible for disrupting the funeral. But while Yuder was lost in thought, watching the departing drunkards, someone grabbed his wrist. When he looked up, it was Kishiar, who had changed his appearance.

“I turned around while walking and got surprised when I didn’t see you.”

“Oh, I apologize.”

“I wonder what caught your attention so much.”

“I was just lost in some thoughts…”

He couldn’t confess that he was eavesdropping on a conversation about the Apeto family, so he averted his gaze. Kishiar exhaled a short sigh and looked away, his gaze fixed on the three drunkards who had disappeared around the corner of an alley.

“If you wanted to drink instead of having dinner, you should’ve told me.”

“No, that’s not it.”

“Theres no harm anyway, so you can consume whatever you want.”

Despite saying no, it was of little use. Kishiar, taking hold of Yuder’s wrist, changed their direction and headed somewhere else. The place where he stopped was in front of an old tavern, where laughter could be heard leaking out. Entering through the door hanging beneath an almost broken wooden sign, Kishiar looked around several times before promptly finding an empty seat and sitting down.

“Sit.”

“…”

Other than the pillars where the lanterns hung and the table stacked with plenty of alcohol, the rest of the place was intentionally left dark. The place was filled with a strong smell of alcohol that one could get drunk just by sniffing it, but surprisingly, the atmosphere wasn’t bad at all. As Yuder instinctively checked the surroundings for anyone who looked dangerous, a man with a bandit-like expression

wearing an apron approached and slammed down two large beer mugs.

“Two beers. Anything else you need?”

“We’ll need a side dish, Southern-style roast pork leg. And if you have the ingredients, some fried beans as well.”

As Kishiar casually responded with a wink, the bandit-like man grinned.

“Nice combination. I’ll bring it over soon.”

“He served us beer right away, even though we didn’t order any.”

“That’s the only thing they sell.”

Kishiar casually replied to Yuder’s murmured comment after the man had disappeared.

“You seem to come here often.”

“True. I’m someone who never misses a good time, anywhere. I know almost all the stores within the capital.”

Kishiar chuckled while downing his beer nonchalantly.

“The owner of this place is a retired mercenary who used to work as a bodyguard in the inner wall district. He started this place using his connections, so they have quite a variety of dishes. The taste of the alcohol is not bad either.”

“I see.”

Yuder was surprised that he hadn’t known about such a place, despite having lived much longer than Kishiar before dying. In his previous life, he had never come to such a place with him either.

“Do you often come to places like this when you go out at night? It would seem difficult to come alone, though……”

“Of course, I don’t come alone.”

Kishiar cut him short.

“I have people to meet.”

“People to meet… No, never mind.”

“Not lovers of the night.”

Kishiar let out a laugh as if guessing what Yuder was thinking.

“Friends. Or subordinates. Or informants. Or people I need to observe. There are always plenty of people to meet.”

“…”

Friends, subordinates, informants, and subjects of observation. Yuder was taken aback that none of the words he had anticipated were included.

Even in his previous life, Kishiar often went out and came back, changing his appearance frequently. After initially asking him where he was going and receiving a reply not to ask, he had written it off as simply nighttime fun and completely ignored it.

Just as the present Yuder was different from the Yuder of the past, the Kishiar of the past was definitely different from the current Kishiar. Thinking about it, the past Kishiar had certainly put up walls and tried to push Yuder away.

Seeing the contrast between the past Kishiar, who would not answer anything, and the current Kishiar, who would answer any question asked, Yuder felt the distinct difference he hadn’t noticed before and felt a little odd.

“Were you surprised?”

“…No.”

Yuder forcefully pushed away the memories from his previous life. Shortly after, a plateful of dishes arrived. The Southern-style roast pork leg, heavily sprinkled with spices, tasted less overwhelming than he had expected.

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Chapter 193

“It’s not as oily as southern cuisine usually is, is it?”

Kishiar started the conversation as if reading Yuder’s thoughts.

“Yes, it’s delicious.”

“You eat well. It’s good to see. If it’s not enough, I’ll order more. Eat plenty.”

With that, Kishiar naturally picked up a deep-fried bean, complete with shell, and tossed it into his mouth. His behavior didn’t seem out of place, even when compared to the surrounding commoners.

For a while, they ate their meat and fried food in silence, sipping their drinks. Once his belly was somewhat full, Yuder raised his head and saw Kishiar, who sat opposite him, resting his chin in his hand and gazing to one side. Yuder turned his head in the same direction.

There, three men were heartily drinking and chatting.

“I’m thinking of importing goods from the north next year…”

“When I’ve saved enough for retirement, I might open a place like this. I’ll have to discuss it with my wife, though…”

“After all, despite everything, this place is the best…”

Even though their conversations didn’t seem to follow a coherent theme, it was intriguing how they could continue conversing. It didn’t seem like an interesting conversation, but Kishiar continued to sip his drink, watching their chatter with a slight smile playing on his lips.

What could possibly be so interesting about it?

Was he simply fascinated by the act of observing commoners, with whom he usually didn't interact?

While Yuder was musing over these thoughts and sipping his beer, which wasn't strong enough to get him drunk, the men finally got up, paid their bill, and left the pub. Kishiar's gaze turned back to Yuder.

"Your eyes look like you're unsure of what I find so interesting."

"…No, not at all."

"Well, there's nothing I can do if it seems strange to you. I quite enjoy listening to such conversations."

"You enjoy them?"

Despite his denial, Yuder couldn't help but question him. Kishiar kindly refrained from pointing out the contradiction.

"Yes. There's nothing as intriguing as observing strangers engaging in peaceful conversation."

The conversation of strangers. How could that be enjoyable?

"I'm sorry, but I don't understand your meaning, Commander."

As Yuder responded cautiously, Kishiar shook his head.

"There's not a deep meaning to it. But isn't there anything better to understand the public sentiment than the stories shared over drinks? Listening to peaceful conversations like earlier, no matter how troublesome things are at the top, it reassures me that someone still thinks this country, ruled by His Majesty the Emperor, is okay."

While speaking at a leisurely pace, Kishiar ran his finger over the bead of condensation on his glass.

“Well, it is childish of me to constantly seek reassurance that the path I have willingly chosen is correct. Hence, it’s a secret that I listen with such thoughts in mind.”

Others would think that I’m simply too interested in the common people. As Kishiar murmured this, he quickly suppressed his laughter and finished off the last of his beer. Yuder, leaving only a few pieces of bone and nearly finishing his grilled hind leg, opened his mouth with difficulty.

“So… it’s not a secret to me?”

“Will you insult me as a hypocrite because you heard this? Or despise me for being childish?”

Naturally, it was neither. Upon witnessing Yuder’s silence, a soft satisfaction rose and disappeared on Kishiar’s face, as if saying, ‘That’s exactly why.’

“Will you have more?”

At that moment, a man with a bandit-like demeanor, having cleared all other tables, approached and looked down at their nearly empty table, asking. Tilting his head as if it didn’t matter what Kishiar chose, he turned his gaze towards Yuder.

“More to drink?”

“No, thank you.”

“Alright, get up then.”

Rising from his seat, Kishiar took a few coins from his pocket and handed them to the man. They had finished their meal and he assumed they would leave, but the direction Kishiar began to walk was the exact opposite of where they had originally come from.

“Commander… where are you going?”

Kishiar, rarely more serious than usual, swallowed the word he had intended to use and responded.

“I’m going for a walk. The night breeze feels good and I’m full from the meal. That’s what rest is.”

It seemed that he still had not given up on his dream of teaching Yuder what real rest was. Yuder swallowed his words of protest and sighed.

“Is there a place to walk around here?”

“Why wouldn’t there be? If we walk, we’ll come across numerous beautiful sights in the capital. The closest place from here is… yes, it must be where the Emperor’s Sword Mark is.”

Despite his face being too faint to remember after using the magic tool, Kishiar’s voice in the darkness of the street was consistently low and beautiful.

“Come closer. There’s no need to follow me from behind.”

He blocked Yuder’s attempt to subtly back away, leaving him no choice. Yuder walked shoulder to shoulder with Kishiar. Even though nobody would know who they were, he felt an odd tension seeping through his palms. As Yuder was feigning calmness, Kishiar suddenly opened his mouth to ask a question.

“Have you seen the Emperor’s Sword Mark?”

“…No, I haven’t.”

The only time he’d seen it was in passing in his previous life, so it seemed right to say he hadn’t seen it now.

“It’s the trace of a gigantic sword left on a solid wall built by the first emperor. Originally, they were going to build a city wall there, but after the first emperor died, they knocked down everything except that one piece of wall.”

“I see.”

“It’s said to be the largest mark among those left in history by Swordmasters. Every Swordmaster thereafter visited the place at least once to compare their own marks left with wooden swords. Yet, not a single one left a larger mark.”

While walking and talking, a stone wall erected not far away revealed itself. The old wall was left standing like a fence along the thicket, and a deep sword mark horizontally etched without end at chest level was clear even from a distance.

“Do you see it? That sword mark.”

“Yes, I see it.”

Kishiar leisurely walked closer to the Emperor’s Sword Mark. Yuder looked at the similar yet different marks around the sword mark. Plaques indicating who had challenged and left a mark were attached to the other sword marks left above and below the Emperor’s Sword Mark.

‘There were really a lot of names that I had only seen in history books who had come here to challenge.’

However, as Kishiar had stated, there were no traces more profound, clearer, and lasting than the Emperor’s Sword Mark.

“There’s a superstition that one’s luck improves if they walk around this sword mark from end to end.”

“Really?”

“Do you really think so? It’s just a myth created for diplomatic and tourism purposes. Those learning the sword among foreign dignitaries always wish to visit here. It was created to make them feel better, believing they could attain some luck while they’re at it.”

Kishiar, who freely spoke words that would disappoint the visiting dignitaries, started walking along the sword mark slowly. Yuder, following him, suddenly wondered if any of these countless sword marks were Kishiar’s.

He and his adjutant, Nathan Zucker, were both capable of using sword aura. So, might they have secretly come and challenged the Emperor’s Sword Mark? Once curiosity took root, Yuder found himself unable to suppress his desire for an answer. After a moment of hesitation, he finally asked,

“So, Commander, you can also use sword aura, right?”

“Hmm?”

Kishiar turned his head. He was not only capable of using sword aura; he was also the owner of a divine sword. Although Yuder had rarely seen him carrying the divine sword properly.

“Why do you ask?”

Looking at the traces of others left on the Emperor’s Sword Mark, Yuder continued,

“Could there be any of your marks among these sword marks?”

“Are you referring to me? No…”

As if unexpectedly, Kishiar turned his gaze to the deep traces left by time.

“I don’t have any here.”

“Why? You’re more than qualified.”

“Well, because… I guess I’ve never thought about it.”

Kishiar smiled and shrugged.

“I never considered challenging this place as it’s not a power to reveal openly. I apologize if this disappoints you.”

“I see.”

He wasn’t disappointed. Just a bit regretful. As Yuder continued walking along the rugged wall of sword marks, he spoke,

“It’s a pity. Who knows, if you had left a scar, it might have been bigger than the Emperor’s Sword Mark.”

“You think so?”

Kishiar broke into laughter.

“You always overestimate me.”

Overestimating someone who held four powers within one body? Yuder felt as if he was underestimating him, unable to know the limits of his power.

“But… yes. Listening to you reminds me of something.”

Kishiar suddenly stopped walking. Raising his hand towards the Emperor’s Sword Mark, a smile played at his lips.

“I think I wanted to leave my name here when I was young. The one who taught me swordsmanship kindled an unwarranted hope that I could do it if I tried.”

The mysterious smile in his eyes as he traced the deep sword mark, large enough to fit a wrist inside, suggested he was recalling

an unfathomable past moment.

“It’s not a pleasant memory. That’s probably why I didn’t cling to this place.”

“You could do it now.”

“Do you want me to challenge this place?”

That question, oddly, seemed to imply more than just a literal challenge.

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Chapter 194

“No one has ever encouraged me to use the power I’ve possessed until now.”

Could it have been because he was incapable of utilizing his strength due to his body?

Yuder recalled a tale of a vessel he’d once heard, feeling a twinge of regret as he wondered if he’d been reckless in bringing up such a reckless topic.

“I didn’t wish for you to harm yourself to do this. If I’ve overstepped my bounds, I apologize.”

“No. Actually, it feels quite good. I was curious about what it feels like to live up to someone’s expectations.”

It’d been a long while. Muttering under his breath, Kishiar’s elongated fingers traced the countless sword marks of nameless knights engraved on the Emperor’s Sword Mark. Unlike the sword marks of famous swordmasters that were marked with nameplates, there were even more marks left by those unnamed, simply regarded as scratches and left as such. Despite knowing this, he wondered why they left their marks on the blade.

“Yes, there were times in my youth when I was quite upset. After all, how easily could I accept that I, a human being with strength, must always step back and hide it? The life of not being expected of anything means that I should not expect anything beyond survival from myself. It took a considerable amount of time to accept that.”

A life with no expectations. It made him wonder if this wasn’t just about his physical condition, but perhaps this statement also pierced

through the trajectory of the life Kishiar La Orr had to live as the Duke of Peletta.

The instinct to use his strength, and the desire to do so, were suppressed, trampled, and continually pushed down as he lived. The beast's blood-red eyes, now accustomed to intense restraint and patience, looked numbly at the faintly weathered sword marks.

"Even now, when I can finally break free from it, when I see you, I become aware that I haven't changed, and neither has my surroundings."

His voice, which had been whispering softly, fell silent, and his gaze shifted to Yuder's face.

"That's why I need you, Yuder Aile."

At that moment, his heart pounded loudly.

"I'd like you to teach me more. Things I couldn't have, and what I need. You probably know."

"…"

He was just a sinner who committed foolish acts, died, and returned, he was not great enough to receive the intense emotions nested in his gaze. Yuder swallowed the surging guilt and bowed his head.

"I'm not sure. I'm already your assistant. If you give me orders, that's all, but what more are you saying…"

"Orders are not enough."

Kishiar quietly responded, reaching out his hand. His fingertips, gently brushing over the pale cheek, lightly lifted the chin, forcing their eyes to meet.

“Something I still don’t know…”

Something still unknown to him.

His downward gaze said so. His gaze, which he could not escape from, inexplicably deepened. Suddenly, a captivating red color emerged over his normally hidden brown eyes.

The touched skin strangely grew hotter and hotter. As he breathed shallowly, shivering as if drawn to the heat, suddenly a force clenching his chin made it a bit painful.

“Ah”

He snapped back to consciousness in surprise from the pain. His hand had already fallen again.

‘Just now. What was that?’

What on earth was that strange feeling, as if he was being drawn towards something?

“Alright. I’ll show you what you wanted.”

Kishiar, who had turned his body towards the Emperor’s Sword Mark, quietly opened his mouth.

“It’s a rule to meet expectations when they’re given. Let’s give it a try.”

“Eh?”

“The sword mark, I mean.”

“Really?”

Yuder, startled by the belated response, quickly forgot about the strange sensation he had just felt.

“But not right now.”

There is no wooden sword handy to leave a sword mark, Kishiar murmured, showing off his empty belt.

“I was planning to announce it after wrapping up Apeto Family’s trial anyway, I’ll definitely show you then.”

Thinking of Divine Sword Orr, which had been stored in Kishiar’s office for a long time, Yuder felt his blood boil with anticipation.

“As for the divine sword”

“It’s time to reveal who its master is. The time has come.”

“Are you sure?”

Being the master of the divine sword was never easy. Despite his lack of interest in being the master of the divine sword in his previous life, he could feel how many were targeting him because of it.

Yet, this event was sure to be the most solid method for Kishiar, who had been neglected by many until now, to gain immediate recognition.

“If the trial ends as we wish, then Duke Diarca and Prince Katchian will officially step forward, and we won’t be able to face them the way we have so far. This has been planned in advance.”

To face an enemy who would not be off-guard, such preparation was necessary. It appeared that revealing his ownership of the divine sword had been delayed as a card to be used for that purpose.

“I will help you, no matter what.”

As Yuder nodded, a gentle smile crept onto his face again, as if he had never been serious.

“Shall we finish our walk for now? We haven’t even done half of it.”

“Are you really planning to walk around this long wall?”

“Of course. Are you going to miss this opportunity to grab some luck after coming this far?”

“You were the one who said it was a superstition.”

But his objection was easily ignored. Only after walking around the wall alongside the seemingly joyous Kishiar could Yuder finish his exercise, masquerading as rest, and return to the office.

“Did you enjoy today’s rest?”

“Next time, I will rest by myself. You don’t have to worry too much.”

“Oh dear. If you didn’t enjoy it, I’ll have to try harder next time.”

What did he mean by trying harder? Yuder didn’t even dare to ask. Seeing Kishiar bursting into laughter, Yuder felt his mood plummet further.

“Please go in.”

“Alright. Sleep well, see you tomorrow.”

Kishiar ruffled Yuder’s fringe lightly and disappeared up the stairs to his office.

‘Is this what he meant by not letting my guard down?’

It seemed clear that he’d taken a liking to this prank since the last time. Yuder stood quietly for a moment, tidying his tousled hair, then let out a sigh.

It had been a strange day. If he had told the Yuder Aile of his previous life that he himself had had dinner in a shabby pub with Kishiar, walked around, and heard all sorts of things, he wouldn't have believed it.

'When I first came here, I hadn't expected to become so close with Kishiar La Orr.'

That was definitely the case at the start. But how did it happen that their relationship changed so much? Yuder found himself somewhat foolish for not getting angry even as Kishiar openly teased him like a child.

'But what exactly was that gaze back then… I really can't figure it out.'

What was that peculiar sensation he felt as the gaze they shared in front of the stone wall engraved with the Emperor's Sword Mark began to darken? It vanished so quickly that it was hard to guess if he had genuinely felt it, yet the warm thrill he experienced then was still faintly present in his mind.

Could it have been the attraction between second gender Awakeners that had come up in Beltrail's research? Yuder rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Of course, he couldn't feel the same sensation now.

—

The next day, as soon as daylight broke, unexpected visitors came looking for the Cavalry.

"I've heard there are members of the Cavalry here! May I see someone named Yuder, by any chance?"

Seeing the soldiers in imperial uniforms who came shouting, the startled Cavalry went to find Yuder and informed him of the visitors.

As Yuder stepped out of the Cavalry quarters, his eyes widened slightly upon seeing Sunz and Emon, the imperial soldiers he had met several months ago during the Red Stone recovery mission.

“Sunz.”

“Yuder. Long time no see!”

Sunz, who had the power of vision, greeted him with a wave. His sad, sad smile was just as he remembered.

“And Mr. Emon, you’re here too.”

“Just call me Emon. What’s with the ‘Mr’? Gives me goosebumps. Anyway, it’s good to see you looking well.”

Emon greeted him with a grimace. Yuder led them to his room. There were too many prying eyes outside and in the lounge; it would have been hard to escape the curious stares that were already gathering.

“I should offer you something to drink, but I’m afraid I have nothing. My apologies.”

“Don’t worry about it. We’re the ones who dropped in unexpectedly, after all.”

Sunz chuckled and shook his head.

“But to come here so suddenly… was there something?”

“Ah. We were also personnel dispatched to maintain law and order during the festival period. Before heading back, we wanted to see you again, so we searched and searched.”

Yuder was quite surprised at Sunz’s words. He hadn’t expected them to be part of the imperial forces that had been in the capital

throughout the festival. He hadn't even imagined it as he had not encountered them once.

"I had no idea. If I knew you were here, I would have paid you a visit."

"Weren't we all busy? Emon and I were assigned to different places. I was at the 5th Wall, and Emon was at the 6th Wall. We were dispatched to prevent potential monument destruction, so we hardly ran into anyone else."

"I see."

Hearing Yuder's response, Sunz suddenly grinned and lowered his voice.

"But you know, this is a big deal. Do you understand? The fact that we, who were provincial soldiers, were chosen as temporary peacekeepers in the capital - it's something that's never happened before."

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Sunz tried to contain his excitement, but his eyes betrayed an irrepressible sense of satisfaction.

“Besides Emon and me, many of our Awakeners friends who had worked together in the mountains for two years back then were selected this time. The southern army officer who picked us didn’t explicitly state that it was based on our abilities, but I’m certain that had a significant influence. So… Yuder, you were right!”

Yuder recalled the words he had given them before. Even if not immediately, soon at a higher place, or when the empire would need their power, he had told them not to neglect their development. He was even surprised himself that the results appeared so quickly.

“Do you mean they recognized your abilities and picked you?”

“After you left, we also finished our mission and scattered back to our original regions. But soon after, General Gino suddenly ordered all southern army soldiers to undergo physical examinations earlier than usual. It was the first time I revealed what my ability was to the superiors, and they were extremely surprised. Emon, you saw that too, right?”

At the cue of Sunz’s words, Emon also opened his mouth.

“Right. After that, the salaries of the Awakened soldiers increased a bit, and unlike other soldiers, we were given time to train our abilities separately. That’s when I started to think that something might change, just like you said.”

The once cynical and apathetic demeanor he had shown had softened considerably, likely due to this.

“From what we heard, General Gino suddenly changed the treatment of the Awakened soldiers because of the influence of Duke Peletta and the Cavalry. I can’t tell you how much we’ve heard about the Cavalry since we arrived in the capital.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. Even the superiors who summoned us to the capital mentioned you guys and hinted several times that they would like our abilities to be on par with the Cavalry. Isn’t that all thanks to the Awakeners, who proved their strength through the Cavalry?”

Sunz’s eyes glittered with admiration and favor as he looked at Yuder.

“They said there would be great rewards when we finish this mission and return. Maybe… maybe we finally have a chance for promotion.”

“Really?”

Yuder was inwardly surprised at the mention of rewards. It would be surprising if they were given a chance for promotion as they said, but the first thing that came to his mind was the speculation that the military might have decided to create a special unit like in his previous life.

‘Unlike in my previous life, the treatment of Awakened soldiers is improving in the presence of General Gino Bordelli, so it won’t be like that time even if a special unit is created again…’

“Well, the speculation that a promotion will be the reward is not certain, but Sunz and I suspect that it might be.”

Emon scratched his head with a smug smile.

“It might sound like we’re bragging… but after meeting you, both Sunz and I worked hard. While on missions, we’ve achieved results that have surprised the superiors several times. That’s why we have high hopes for the reward.”

Looking at the young man’s face filled with anticipation for the future, it seemed like a lie that he had been the same person he first met. Yuder looked at the two men’s faces and slowly opened his mouth.

“That’s really great news. Then… since it might be a waste just to see faces while you’re visiting the Cavalry, how about watching us train before you leave?”

“Would that be alright?”

“We’re grateful, but isn’t the training content classified…?”

Sunz and Emon, looking at each other’s faces, cautiously questioned.

“The time is merely spent on basic training as a group. There’s really nothing classified about that. I’m sure our Commander would permit this much.”

While the future was uncertain, Sunz and Emon had high potential to play significant roles as Awakeners in the military later on. It couldn’t hurt to provide them an experience that would further develop their abilities, given their already considerable goodwill towards Yuder.

“Coincidentally, today is the first day of our newly revised training. Let’s go.”

The two men rose hurriedly, following Yuder with flustered expressions. They left the room and headed towards the training field behind the quarters.

“Damn! The flame went out again!”

“Ugh! When will you be able to control your strength? If I hadn’t dodged, I would have been dead!”

“30 seconds? You call that maintaining? How the hell did you get into the Cavalry?”

As soon as they entered, they saw a scene of chaos that was many times greater than usual. Numerous soldiers were gathered on the training field, rolling around on the ground in disarray, spewing a mix of dying noises and curses. Seeing the pandemonium and loud noises, Sunz and Emon’s eyes widened.

“This… This is training…? It’s not a brawl…?”

“Do we have to join…?”

“It’s not a fight, it’s sparring training. The aim is to pair individuals with opposing weaknesses to train as if in a real fight.”

Yuder calmly explained, observing the scene.

“One side can control their strength well but can’t maintain it for long. On the other hand, the opposite group can maintain their power well but can’t control it. The winners of the sparring…”

Suddenly, a fireball flew toward them. Yuder immediately extended his hand, creating a curtain of water. With an explosive sound, the fireball hit the water wall and quickly disintegrated.

“Uh, my apologies. Anyway, the winners are given the chance to eat a special meal at dinner tonight.”

“…That’s it?”

Sunz, who thought he was about to be hit by the fireball, asked while calming his pounding heart.

“So all these people are… undergoing this dangerous and intense training just to have a better meal…?”

“It may seem like a trivial reward, but it’s important to have an achievable, yet definite goal. You’ll find yourself passionately immersed before you know it.”

It was training they had to do anyway. In Yuder’s experience, the key to effectively developing abilities was to create an environment that genuinely felt threatening, like a real fight.

At first, they may think that they can do without the special meal. However, once the mood is set, they become intensely focused as if their lives depended on it. And once the individual training that only requires personal responsibility for failure evolves into a team battle where the whole team shares the victory or defeat, the level of concentration skyrockets.

‘This will serve as training and also foster camaraderie, which will be useful for future tasks. It’s a win-win.’

Though some were moving lazily on the first day, he found it a relief that everyone seemed to be sincerely sparring more than he expected.

“That’s… impressive.”

Sunz’s pupils were shaking uncontrollably.

“Its not just here. Let’s go check out other places.”

Afterward, they briefly observed the members training in other arenas arranged around them. Although the content differed slightly, the earnest effort and tenacity shared by all remained constant. In contrast to Yuder’s satisfaction, a light of fear gradually faded from the eyes of Sunz and Emon.

By the time they had to return, and they arrived back in front of their quarters, both men were engrossed in deep thought, remaining silent.

“Were you shocked? You both seem lost in thought.”

“Ah… no, not at all. It was just more terrifying… no, more systematic than we expected.”

In response to Yuder’s question, Sunz hastily waved his hand. He then sighed with a hesitant expression.

“Actually, we also tried to devise training methods with our comrades, but the consensus was that we gained more from completing a single monster extermination mission. However, after seeing today’s training in the Cavalry, I realized there’s a way to train without necessarily courting danger. Of course, it didn’t look easy…”

Sunz’s words elicited a nod from Emon in agreement.

“It did look quite challenging.”

“How could you call something an ‘exercise’ if it’s easy?”

Yuder interrupted their conversation sharply.

“You have to train more than the other knight orders and mages who have already settled down. Only then you will not miss the opportunity when it comes.”

“I see… You’re right. If Awakeners want to make a place for themselves, they must outperform those who are already in position.”

Sunz murmured lost in thought, then nodded, a smile crossing his face.

“Thank you, Yuder. This has been a really valuable experience.”

“Not at all. If you ever need assistance, don’t hesitate to contact me again.”

Yuder smiled, catching the questioning looks from the two men.

“We may be from different organizations, but we’re all Awakeners, aren’t we? I believe that if we want to change the perception of Awakeners within the Empire, we can’t just rely on one side doing well. Our Commander also said on the day of the Cavalry’s entrance ceremony to act for our own freedom.”

If Kishiar were to hear this, who knows what he would say.

“So that’s it. For freedom…”

Sunz and Emon gazed up at the Cavalry building, murmuring to themselves.

“There was such a deep meaning to the Cavalry… I don’t quite understand it because it’s too complicated, but it’s incredibly moving…”

“Hm? I haven’t seen you two before. Who are you?”

However, a voice from behind them abruptly interrupted the serene moment, causing the atmosphere to stiffen instantly. Seeing the shocked expressions of Sunz and Emon, Yuder turned around. There stood Kishiar, wearing a cloak over his uniform, walking towards them with Nathan Zuckerman.

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Chapter 196

“Commander.”

As if they had just returned from an outing somewhere, they lowered their heads to greet a carriage that was just disappearing behind them. Sunz and Emon, who were next to Yuder, also hurriedly lowered their heads and stretched out their hands to give an imperial military-style salute.

“Good day, Duke.”

“We are honored to meet you, Duke.”

“Lift your heads.”

The reply was gentle, but Sunz and Emon struggled to comply. It was natural, considering this was likely their first time facing someone as high-ranking as Kishiar. If it had been any other noble, they would have understandably become angry upon being disregarded, but both Kishiar and Nathan, his steadfast adjutant, were exceptionally patient.

Only when the ensuing silence had made the two men grow even more uneasy, and they had fully raised their heads, did Kishiar speak again with a smile.

“Imperial soldiers, are you… From where?”

“I… I am Sunz, from the Southern Army, the Gulkan region!”

“I am Emon, also of the Gulkan region, Southern Army!”

Hearing the mention of the Southern Army, Kishiar slightly shifted his gaze, presumably guessing why they were accompanying Yuder.

In response to Kishiar’s meaningful look, Yuder gave a slight nod and stepped forward.

“They are acquaintances with whom I previously formed a bond. They were deployed as peacekeepers for the festival. Despite being busy, they wanted to see me before returning to Gulkan, so they paid a visit. Good men, indeed.”

“Oh, I see. Are you also Awakeners, then?”

“Yes, y-yes, we are!”

Sunz answered in the most formal tone he had used yet.

“What abilities do you possess?”

“I have the modest ability of vision. Emon beside me can summon a large amount of fire very quickly!”

At that moment, Kishiar’s eyes sparkled with renewed interest.

“You both possess valuable abilities. You will undoubtedly become significant pillars of the Imperial Army.”

“I believe so as well.”

Hearing Yuder align with Kishiar’s praise, Sunz’s face flushed beet red. If the person on the other side hadn’t been Kishiar, one could have presumed him to be embarrassed. Emon, too, who had been keeping a calm demeanor, now bore a flustered expression as he offered his thanks.

“Th-thank you….”

“I’ve had discussions about the Awakened soldiers within the Imperial Army with General Gino. With the rapid changes across the continent, we agree that we need fresh blood like you.”

“D-did the General say that?!”

The casual remark seemingly fell on deaf ears for the overwhelmed Sunz and Emon, but not for Yuder.

‘As I thought.’

It seemed undeniable that Kishiar had informed General Gino about the Awakened soldiers, thereby altering the situation.

“Indeed… I hope to encounter brave soldiers with exceptional abilities for good causes again. You seemed to be about to leave - do you need guidance out of the grounds?”

“We’re good, thank you!”

Sunz, having responded energetically, turned to Yuder, panting slightly.

“Yuder. Today… thank you. And, next time”

“Yes. Until we meet again. Remember, the offer I made earlier stands at any time.”

The two men, who had stared at Yuder as if impressed by his dispassionate reply, quickly turned their bodies and promptly made a counter-response before scurrying away. As Yuder watched their backs disappear rapidly, he heard the sound of Kishiar’s chuckling.

“Interesting characters, they are. Did you meet them during the retrieval operation?”

“Yes. I heard that the treatment of Awakened soldiers has suddenly changed within the Southern Army. By any chance, did you have a hand in that, Commander?”

“All I did was have a few words with General Gino after listening to you. How much influence could I possibly have on the army? But

I’m glad that such a change occurred.”

Kishiar, who vaguely responded, subtly hinted at future plans with a smile.

“By the way, General Gino was suggesting forming a group within the Southern Army, much like the Cavalry, composed of Awakeners. It might be that the Cavalry and the Awakened soldiers of the Southern Army will need to collaborate in the future, so we should maintain the connections that we’ve already built.”

“Yes. Of course, I intend to do so.”

Kishiar, too, had similar thoughts to Yuder and had been moving accordingly. In their shared gaze, brief moments of satisfaction and admiration for each other flickered past. Kishiar, who naturally reached his hand above Yuder’s head while smiling at him, found himself just reaching air.

“I didn’t even need to give specific instructions for our actions to align so well. I must say, I chose my assistant wisely.”

“Thanks for the compliment, but I won’t fall for it a third time.”

Yuder quickly stepped back before Kishiar could ruffle his hair.

“Ah, that’s a shame.”

Kishiar, looking at his empty hand, turned his body and stepped into the entrance of the lodging building. Nathan Zuckerman followed behind him. Yuder only noticed the two boxes that Nathan had been holding. Lowering his voice, he asked,

“Come to think of it… where did you go?”

“After meeting with the Peletta Knights, we went to the Imperial Mage building.”

Nathan replied flatly in place of Kishiar.

“Well, there were some things to pick up.”

Kishiar’s explanation only deepened the mystery. If the knights from the Peletta Knight Order were not invited to the Cavalry and Kishiar had to go and fetch the items himself, then whatever was inside must be highly confidential. Moreover, it was from the Imperial Mage building. Yuder couldn’t fathom the answer, no matter how much he thought about it.

“Curious?”

“Yes.”

“Not even refusing once, typical of you.”

Kishiar, finding something amusing, chuckled once again and beckoned Yuder to come closer.

“Follow me. I was planning to call you and explain anyway.”

As soon as Kishiar entered his office, he took off his cloak and handed it to Nathan Zuckerman.

“Nathan, clean this up and then carry on with the task I gave you earlier.”

“Understood.”

After Nathan had carefully placed the boxes on the table and left, Kishiar took a deep breath and sat down. A faint sign of fatigue, which was not apparent until now, could be seen on his face as he moved his head to loosen his muscles.

“Going out early and coming back, I’m finally a bit relaxed. How is the training progress going? Is it going well?”

“Yes. So far, there have been no problems.”

“When do you plan to participate in the group training?”

“According to the schedule… it would be in two weeks.”

The second gender manifestation had ended, and his body had fully recovered, but the reason Yuder did not participate in the group training that day was due to the internal rules Kishiar had previously established and announced. According to these rules, Cavalry members could not participate in intense training or assignments for two weeks following their manifestation.

Yuder had initially planned to stand back for a while, observing how the training was progressing and making corrections as necessary, so this didn’t pose a problem, although it was a bit disappointing. Kishiar seemed to catch Yuder’s slight regret and gave a faint smile.

“When I made that rule, I didn’t have any particular thoughts, but it has turned out to be quite useful. I should thank the legal scholars who worked hard with me.”

“…”

“Anyway, I’m glad to hear things are going well. I’ll be preoccupied with the trial of the Apeto family and the issues arising from it, so you’ll have to work hard with the Deputy Commanders in the meantime.”

“Yes.”

Yuder had expected this. That very morning, the members had been fervently discussing the news that the disrupted trial of the Apeto family was to resume in three days. Thanks to them, Yuder learned that the rumor about Kishiar killing the second son of the

Apeto family, Lenore, had now changed into a rumor about the Crown Prince.

Although the members who spread the rumor believed in Kishiar's innocence and were mostly angered towards the Crown Prince, the public opinion was not necessarily the same.

"So, did you collect the items in those boxes in connection with that?"

"Yes. Um… one of them is."

Kishiar gave a curious answer and turned his gaze to the small, sturdy wooden boxes on the table. As he opened the lid of the white box on the right, a thick dust smell quickly filled the air.

"What is this?"

"This is the poison ingredient you found on Lenore Shand Apeto's corpse and in his letter."

The first box contained a dried white mushroom bundle.

"When I checked it, this mushroom hardly grows in the capital and its vicinity. As you said, commoners sometimes use it as medicine, not poison, so there were almost no cases where it was properly harvested and brought in a refined form."

Kishiar reached out and fiddled with the outside of the opened box.

"The Peletta Knights and the informants have worked quite hard to trace where the Crown Prince got the poison. This is the result."

Yuder immediately straightened up and closely examined the mushroom.

"Did you succeed in tracking it down?"

“They were pretty cunning… but yes, we’ve found a lead.”

The red eyes of Kishiar narrowed, glinting with a cold light.

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“One of the Crown Prince’s servants was confirmed to have refined it in a distant land under his command and brought it to the Capital.”

“So then…”

As he met Yuder’s gaze, Kishiar nodded with a sense of satisfaction.

“Right. We’ve secured additional evidence as well, so I’m thinking of revealing it when the first son of Apeto reaches out. The Crown Prince will no longer be able to meddle with the Apeto family. A deep rift will surely form between the Diarca and Apeto families. I’m curious to see how it feels to fall into a pit he dug himself.”

“That’s a relief.”

The words slipped out before he had a chance to process them. Yuder was momentarily taken aback, but soon lowered his eyes and mumbled it again.

“Truly… it’s a relief.”

Kishiar’s lonely figure at the final day of the Harvest Festival party, amidst numerous murmurings, floated into his mind. Despite being clad in the most magnificent ceremonial attire and exuding an even more radiant sense of dignity, Kishiar looked lonely amid the malice and rumors surrounding him.

Yuder knew he was not the type to be fazed by such matters. However, he simply couldn’t forget the scarred figure that seemed to bear a raging storm all alone that day.

‘So I thought I needed to find out where the Crown Prince Katchian got his poison…’

The unfolding events had kept him so busy that he was a step too late. But his heart was rather warmed. Kishiar was set to demonstrate, clearly and by his own strength, that he wouldn’t laugh off the malice and humiliation he faced like before.

Even based solely on the incident at Lenore’s funeral, it was impossible for Aishes Shan Apeto, or the Duke of Apeto, to trust the Crown Prince and the Diarca family as before. No matter how much the Diarca family claimed this incident was perpetrated solely by the Crown Prince, who would take them at their word? The fracture between the Crown Prince and the Diarca family was bound to widen further.

Adding the new evidence to this, at least until the end of Apeto’s trial, they were certain that they wouldn’t join hands to help each other.

‘Kishiar and the Emperor will exploit this gap, manipulating Aishes to steer the trial’s outcome favorably.’

Even if Aishes quickly took over the crumbling Apeto as he wished, there was no guarantee things would turn out as he hoped. After all, Kishiar wasn’t the only one with keen eyes to seize the opportunity to strike at a tiger that had lost its claws and teeth.

‘Besides, even if Aishes becomes a Duke in this life, if his health is no better than before, perhaps this time too…’

He still didn’t know how Kishiar planned to hunt down Aishes. However, Yuder knew that Aishes would die of illness within a year. Despite thorough investigations into the possibility of assassination in his previous life, there was no doubt he had died from illness.

Although Lenore died earlier this time, Aishes probably wouldn't be able to enjoy the ease of victory for long.

He suddenly wondered if Aishes Shand Apeto's eagerness to topple his father and seize the family power sooner, despite already having a firm place as the successor, might be partly due to his health condition.

"When do you think the first son of Apeto will contact us, Commander?"

"He should arrive soon. Definitely before the trial begins."

A calmness, akin to a predator patiently waiting for its prey, shrouded Kishiar's face, which was filled with certainty.

"This mushroom will be a good gift for him then."

Kishiar closed the lid of the box containing the mushroom. The smell of the mushroom, tickling the nose like dry dust, soon vanished.

"If he comes, you, Yuder, should be behind me this time. Look forward to it."

"Understood."

"And the second thing is…"

Kishiar slowly placed his hand on the lid of the second box. Unlike the first time, there seemed to be a slight hesitation in his manner, causing Yuder to feel puzzled.

'If the mushrooms in the first box were brought by the Knights of Peletta, then the second must have come from the Imperial Mage's office.'

"Here it is."

Finally, his finger, which had been circling over the lid, grasped it tightly as if making a decision and twisted it open. What was revealed from inside the box was a red potion, sloshing within a small glass bottle.

'…Medicine?'

"As you can see, it's medicine."

Kishiar spoke, as if answering Yuder's puzzled gaze.

"What is the medicine for?"

"It's medicine for me to drink."

"Excuse me?"

"It's part of the same context as the previous conversation about vessels."

Kishiar's finger touched the medicine bottle. A brutal mix of apathy and loathing flitted across his eyes that had been absent-mindedly staring off.

"Regardless of how well I manage the opposing energies that share one body, even siphoning off a bit daily, a human body is bound to change as long as it lives. After a certain period of time, the energy in the vessel swells as if it will overflow. Just like the inevitability of winter, no matter how hard we prepare."

"And if it swells… what happens?"

"As I said before, if left alone, the vessel holding the body breaks. It will also break if you try to use all the energy at once."

Kishiar, who had danced around saying the word "die", furrowed his eyebrows.

“So, I regularly take this medicine that helps forcibly discharge energy before it completely overflows.”

Before my awakening, it was once every three months, Kishiar murmured, holding up the medicine bottle. The liquid inside, a lighter hue than blood, seemed ominously foreboding.

“After my awakening, even when the energies entangle and overflow, I’ve come to believe that I won’t die. Still, it’s dangerous not to properly discharge it. Not so much for me, but for those around me.”

He didn’t specify what was dangerous, but Yuder felt like he could guess at the answer Kishiar had omitted.

‘…Does he fall into a rampaging state?’

Even without multiple powers like Kishiar, there were cases amongst the Awakeners where they overused their abilities, which exceeded what their bodies could bear, and they ended up rampaging and dying. If they survived, they’d gain enormous power, incomparable to before, but if they couldn’t endure, the result was either death or a state worse than death.

Wasn’t that the reason why he had been constantly worrying that Kanna might not awaken this time?

Kishiar looked down at the potion in his hand, his expression impassive, seemingly confirming Yuder’s guess.

“This is the second time I’ve gotten this after my awakening. You should be careful for a while, too. You’re the one who needs to be around me the most, besides Nathan.”

It seemed that this was the real reason he had called for Yuder today. Yuder hesitated for a moment, quieting his complex thoughts, and opened his mouth.

“I understand. I will ask Zuckerman about what to be careful of when serving.”

“That’s right. I told him to answer any questions you might have.”

From his answer, Yuder felt a clear determination not to put even a shallow wall between them. How many in this world would willingly offer trust to their subordinates?

‘In this situation, it’s no wonder Zuckerman is wary of me.’

Suppressing his churning emotions, Yuder changed the subject.

“Then, Commander… If you take the medicine well, will you continue to be okay?”

“I suppose that may be the case for now.”

What did he mean by ‘for now’? Did it mean that in the past, the medicine had been of little use? Leaning his head at the words containing a seed of strange anxiety, Kishiar lifted the corner of his mouth faintly.

“It’s a headache, this body. Isn’t this the case of anything becoming poison when taken in excess? The problem is that I can’t withstand the overflowing power.”

“…”

“But it’s okay since I didn’t die. I’m already tiredly familiar with controlling and constantly releasing power, calculating whether it will be a burden or not. In fact, I’ve been quite lucky.”

Just as he was about to think it was fortunate, he remembered that Kishiar had once said that the Emperor already had cracks in his vessel. Kishiar had said that he nearly died due to his vessel in the past, but became alright after awakening.

‘If he hadn’t awakened…’

At that point, Yuder abruptly stopped the thought crossing his mind. The words he had not properly linked in thought until now suddenly connected in a strange sensation, leaving his mind cold.

The identical symptoms that the Emperor and Kishiar experienced. The same problem. The vessel. The Imperial Mage’s Office closely linked with the Imperial Family. The medicine in his hand.

And the peculiar information about the Imperial Family that Enon had shown him before.

Taking a small breath, Yuder alternately looked at the medicine in Kishiar’s hand and his face. Kishiar slightly tilted his head.

“Why. Do you have any questions?”

“I apologize. May I ask a somewhat disrespectful question about the Imperial Family?”

“I permit it. Go ahead.”

A light permission was given. The red eyes looking at Yuder seemed peaceful, as if they already knew what he would ask.

“Are the only ones experiencing this problem… the Commander and His Majesty?”

Kishiar smiled. His lips slowly parted.

“No.”

“…”

“Yuder Aile. Do you remember the story of the ‘Blood of Blessing’ who was said to be passed down in the Apeto family?”

It was something Revlin Shand Apeto had told him when he had visited the Apeto family. Kishiar, who brought up the somewhat odd story of the weak children being born generation after generation and being ironically called ‘blessed,’ had a deeper smile on his lips.

“It was a familiar story to me. The Imperial Family expressed a similar thing as Princes who inherit the title of Duke while retaining the surname ‘La Orr’.”

Information about the Dukes with the surname of La Orr flashed through Yuder’s mind.

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Chapter 198

There were a total of ten individuals who held the surname La Orr in the Orr Empire, excluding Kishiar. Enon had told him that six among them had emerged over the past 300 years. None of them, apart from Kishiar, had shown themselves much to the world before their death, and only a few portraits of them remained. The first thought that crossed his mind upon hearing this was, what?

In truth, he had committed the sacrilege of wondering if there was something wrong with the imperial bloodline.

“Do you guess what I mean? To put it exactly, this is an old problem related to ‘blood’.”

And now, his sacrilegious speculation had become reality, straight from his own mouth.

“Yuder, how much do you know about the First Emperor who founded the Orr Empire?”

“He was born with the blood of the Sun God, received blessings as such, was the greatest swordmaster in history, and was friends with countless heroes…”

As Yuder began to recite in a low voice the explanation he heard every Founding Day about the First Emperor, Kishiar cut him off in the middle. “That’s right. Everyone knows that story,” he interjected.

“The Emperor could use divine power and sword aura. And the Empress was a mage. They had five children, four of whom became the ancestors of the current four Duke houses. In other words, they all share the same origin.”

Kishiar continued calmly with his explanation.

The Imperial family and the four duke houses, both sprung from the same parents as siblings, originally didn't intermarry. However, as generations passed, the situation gradually changed.

Who first felt the need to break the taboo and extend a hand was now impossible to know. The important thing was that one of the best ways to achieve political objectives, then and now, was through marriage.

Human greed revived the fading bloodline. Then something surprising happened. It was revealed that the likelihood of children displaying strong traits of the superior bloodline, which had been gradually fading, was higher when descendants sharing the blood of the First Emperor intermarried.

Feeling the need to preserve the constant 'blood of the god' for governance, the Imperial family began to continuously marry within the four duke houses. What started out of necessity soon became a tradition, which exerted an influence stronger than law.

Even during times of bad relations between the Imperial family and the Dukes, the Emperor's spouse was always chosen from within this circle. For the Duke family, producing the Emperor's spouse was also the best way to maintain their power. The Duke's family had more freedom to marry other noble families, but they often chose to marry within the four Duke houses.

And the bloodline, having grown excessively pure, began to change gradually as time went by.

"Desiring the blood of the god even against natural law, we started to breed monsters."

At the word "monsters" casually thrown out, a sarcastic smile appeared at the corners of Kishiar's mouth.

“About 800 years ago, a certain Crown Prince, who was born with excellent abilities, died just before his coronation. History records it as a tragic explosion accident that occurred in the Imperial Mage’s office, but in reality, his vessel, unable to withstand his overly inflated abilities, shattered all at once. It was a horrifying death, with his physical body bursting and no remains to be found.”

The Imperial family was taken aback when they discovered the cause not long after. But they agreed that they could not abandon the effort to preserve the blood of God. Fortunately, there were no more unfortunate cases of individuals who were born with too powerful abilities for their bodies to handle and consequently died for a long time.

Every hundred years or so, when such individuals appeared, the Imperial family would hurriedly strip them of their legitimate inheritance rights and send them far away after awarding them the empty title of Duke. The first ‘La Orr’ surname was a grand gift an Emperor gave to his beloved but power-hungry Prince. However, this changed afterward.

The individuals banished did not even have the chance to mourn their lost power and family before their vessels began to crack, all suffering in agony until they all died before they reached the age of thirty. It was a horrifying death, when the life force was drained to its limit and the remaining power in the body exploded once the limit was reached.

“They must have realized they could not leave them in the palace or anywhere visible, even knowing they were going to die in that manner. For safety reasons.”

It was more crucial to protect the many who lived, rather than the few failures, as brutal as it might sound. The truth was easily concealed just by not recording it in history.

Naturally, as the cycles repeated, the problems became more severe without getting better. Around 300 years ago, the Imperial family started selecting spouses from among the ducal families, finally recognizing the severity of the issue. Yet, even excluding the Princes and Emperors who became Dukes while bearing the surname ‘La Orr’, many princes and emperors died mysteriously young, one after the other.

Meanwhile, as the Imperial family started to thin, the four ducal houses realized they also shared the Imperial blood. From then on, the nobles, including the ducal houses, began to actively oppose the Imperial family. All blinded by the ambition of taking over the next imperial lineage when the Imperial family disappeared.

Eventually, in this era, the turmoil reached its peak when it was publicly revealed that the current Emperor, Keilusa, had become infertile due to a crack in his vessel.

The Diarca ducal house, successful in installing Katchian as the Crown Prince, became the winner, and the surface conflict subsided. However, a new variable arose.

Kishiar ‘La Orr’ became an Awakener.

“I am not proud of it, but I am confident that there is likely no one who has delved as deeply into this issue as I have. I searched every record I could obtain, including the imperial family tree. In the end, I could not find a solution. However, I am just glad that I am alive and approaching the age of thirty.”

Yuder felt as if he had a glimpse into the relentless effort Kishiar must have put into solving this issue from the cold, yet calm explanation. He was a stubborn man who had striven for an unimaginably long time to resolve his own body’s issue.

The ambitious man hidden behind the playful Duke of Peletta, who had become an Awakener by chance and built the Cavalry,

drove his weakening body to pursue a big goal without giving up. He couldn't even guess where the source of such a tremendous will came from.

He wondered if Kishiar had shared these thoughts in his previous life.

Could he have avoided resentment or doubt in those moments when Kishiar silently pushed him away and did not deny suspicions of rebellion, if he had known then? Could he have asked for more words, instead of remaining silent on those days when Kishiar suddenly visited and spent the night?

Yuder Aile reexamined moments he thought he had no regrets about. It felt odd. Too strange, in fact, that a twisting sensation gripped his stomach.

"…I'm not sure if I'm the one who should be hearing this story."

When Yuder grumbled with a furrowed face, a smile formed on Kishiar's.

"Are you saying that now, after hearing it all?"

"That's what I think, now that I've heard it all."

Having said that, Yuder hesitated for a moment. He took a deep breath and added with difficulty.

"I appreciate your trust but you don't have to go to the extent of enduring discomfort to tell me this. I don't ask for such things."

It was ironic. He heard directly from the man himself a story that he had previously requested Enon to investigate out of necessity, but it didn't feel satisfying or heartening at all.

Could it be because of the look Kishiar had during the entire story? Maybe he was bothered by the fact that his question made Kishiar look full of sarcasm, unable to hide his disgust.

“Oh dear. Did I look uncomfortable? I wish you wouldn’t think that way.”

A playful retort was followed by a captivating gaze.

“It’s just necessary information for the future, information. I did it because I deemed it to be alright. Trust is inherently something to be poured unilaterally. What’s an old story when it’s about holding on to such a charming existence?”

Despite the sight of Yuder’s bizarre facial expression, Kishiar did not stop speaking.

“Anyone who learns about you would feel the same way.”

“Shouldn’t you be saying that to other people, not me?”

As he turned his gaze and responded, a languid reply came back.

“Other people? Who are you talking about?”

Whoever it was, he just wished that he wasn’t the only one who heard Kishiar’s words about being a charming existence. Kishiar laughed softly, looking at the silent Yuder.

“It’s sad that my sincerity doesn’t get across when all I want and think about now is you.”

“…Isn’t it because of the effects of the second gender manifestation that you’re thinking this way, like you mentioned before?”

“I’ve thought about that issue. If it were, this conversation would have taken place in bed by now.”

So, it meant that this was a continuation of completely natural feelings that had been ongoing since before. Kishiar, who made such a tremendous remark as if it was nothing, sent a smirk toward Yuder, who had closed his mouth.

“I’ve always liked you from the beginning. Isn’t that right?”

“…”

“As an assistant who’s so cold yet charming, I, a Commander whose only merit is his face, ought to at least be honest.”

“What I said back then was a slip of the tongue.”

“A slip of the tongue, you say. Does that mean you think I’m not good-looking?”

“Why are you twisting the story? That’s not what I meant.”

“This is disappointing. Who else could one think handsome if not me? Could it be the living rose of our group, Gakane Bolunwald? Or maybe that pharmacist from the medical division who seems to be quite friendly with you? Either way, it’s really going to hurt my pride. Answer carefully.”

He had heard of this Enon before, but what on earth was this new, unheard-of nickname for Gakane? The more they conversed, the more he felt like he was being swallowed by a large snake, but he had no choice. Gritting his teeth, Yuder lowered his head and mustered the strength to spit out his words.

“I think you’re handsome. But…”

“Who?”

“…You, Commander.”

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Chapter 199

It was a difficult admission to make, but given Kishiar's earnest expression, there was little choice. A sense of guilt subtly brushed his mind, prompting the question: why had he made such a response last time, leading to this situation?

"However, I don't believe that's the whole story."

"Hmm?"

Kishiar raised one eyebrow.

"Regardless of how Gakane or Enon look, you are still the Commander, are you not?"

"Enon? Ah, that was the name of the pharmacist, right?"

The topic had suddenly taken a sharp turn.

"Yes."

"It seems you're quite close, calling him by his first name. How did you come to have such a close relationship with this pharmacist? Did you know him even before you joined the Cavalry?"

Hearing such an intrusive question after discussing his most private affairs was inevitably uncomfortable, even for Yuder Aile. It was suddenly apparent that while Kishiar was tearing down walls, Yuder found himself needing to build new ones in response.

And so, he had to maintain a certain distance somehow.

Yuder kept silent for a moment, trying to maintain his composure as much as possible before he spoke.

“That’s correct. Before joining the Cavalry, I happened to receive some help from him.”

“Help?”

“Well, the important point isn’t that.”

“No, isn’t that in fact a significant detail? You, my assistant, have received help. I’m curious, would you explain more?”

His attempt to change the topic failed immediately. Yuder pondered his response during a brief moment of silence. Telling a complete lie would be difficult. However, telling the whole truth was also out of the question. He was belatedly hit with regret for not reporting Enon’s entry beforehand.

‘No helping it.’

The easiest thing to do was to mix truth with falsehood. Yuder decided to talk about his encounter with Enon from his previous life, not the current one.

“Before I joined the Cavalry I happened to get injured. I met him by chance and received treatment, and that’s how we became acquainted.”

Kishiar was silent, seemingly surprised by the unexpected statement.

“He was a stranger who didn’t hesitate to help me, so I visited him a few times to express my gratitude. I was surprised when I found out he joined the Cavalry but please don’t doubt Enon’s abilities or background because of me.”

“Indeed.”

Kishiar murmured, his fingers gently twitching on his armrest.

“So that’s the connection that made you so defensive when I mentioned him.”

Had he read the signs of tension in that short interval? As Yuder froze, unable to respond, a slow smile spread across Kishiar’s face.

“I’ve already done a considerable investigation into that pharmacist before bringing him in, so I’m not suspicious of him. He was well known within the Seventh Wall for his generosity and wisdom. He spent a long time by the side of the poorest among us, so they say.”

The story of Enon that flowed from Kishiar’s lips was unfamiliar. It made sense since they hadn’t had any interaction in their previous lives, yet here they were talking about each other.

“I wondered why a man with his own shop would suddenly want to join our group So, it was because of your connection after all.”

The guess about the direction had been slightly off, but the cause was spot on. After all, it was true that Enon had mentioned coming close to observe Yuder. The sharp perception of Kishiar had crossed the boundary of surprise, causing goosebumps, yet Yuder tried to maintain his calmness.

“That is…”

“No. You don’t need to explain further.”

What could possibly come next? When he was preparing his mind to react without surprise to any statement, a laughter that shattered the covert tension suddenly cut through the air.

“Don’t be so tense. It feels like you might get jealous.”

“Excuse me?”

“I was merely asking out of curiosity. Isn’t it a natural human tendency to want to know more about a subject of interest?”

The tension vanished in an instant. Yuder blinked his eyes, exhaled softly, and nodded his head.

“I understand…”

“I’m a bit disappointed. Despite my shown interest and open doors, you seem to have no trust in me. What more should I do if this isn’t enough?”

Yuder sighed, bowing his head.

“You don’t have to do anything more. I believe you.”

“You believe me?”

“Yes.”

“Then, could you tell me what you think about my interest?”

This question was even more intense than when he had suspected Enon. Yuder averted his eyes, looking at the two trophies on the table, and spoke with difficulty.

“…You mentioned it was a natural interest, but others may misunderstand. It might be better if you restrain your words in front of others.”

“Is that all?”

“I always think about what I can do to respond to the trust you place in me. I worry because it seems like you feel I’m not returning as much as you desire.”

Kishiar frowned and smirked suspiciously.

“Is that all?”

“What more should I say?”

“I thought you quite liked me, too. What about that part?”

A sudden surge stirred within Yuder’s chest. He unwittingly recalled the feelings he had felt for Kishiar in the past, but quickly suppressed them and responded.

“Of course, I respect you. I wish to aid you in your endeavors.”

Kishiar’s gaze became even more peculiar. After a moment, he let out a long sigh and deeply slouched into the couch.

“Yuder Aile.”

“Yes.”

“Take off your glove and give me your hand.”

At the sudden command, Yuder hesitated momentarily but eventually removed his right glove. The spot on the back of his hand from trying to block the blind fire in training earlier hadn’t spread much. Kishiar examined his bare hand and asked softly.

“Did you exert yourself today?”

“I used a bit of strength blocking an attack during training.”

“Any pain?”

“No.”

“Good. That’s fortunate.”

Kishiar held out his hand, clasping Yuder’s fingers and guiding them. His right hand, enveloped perfectly within the large, smooth

hand, felt oddly tingling.

‘…Why isn’t he doing anything?’

He thought Kishiar was about to treat him, but he did nothing. In the silence, the connection between their hands grew progressively more electric. Yuder, feeling sweat beginning to pool in his palm, slowly raised his gaze.

And then, his gaze met with the steady, unblinking red eyes that seemed to be observing his reaction.

“Ah…”

A numbing sensation spread from his fingertips, causing his body to tremble. The hand he touched with Kishiar heated up. An intense sensation that was difficult to explain in words overtook his mind.

‘Just like that time.’

The feeling was similar to when their hands accidentally touched in the carriage. His gaze swirled dizzily in the collision of heat and impulse. Despite his resistance against the suction that seemed to draw him in, it was in vain. Unconsciously, Yuder reached out, wanting to touch Kishiar’s face, overwhelmed by an impulsive desire.

Golden eyelashes. Eyes beneath them like transparent flames. Hair covering the forehead that was gently furrowed. Slightly parted lips that seemed to desire to consume something.

Strangely, he could feel it.

The sweet desire that the existence before him seemed to feel as intensely as hunger. This feeling was just like Yuder’s, perhaps even stronger. His target of desire, to pull him in and hold him, was none other than…

“Please, let go.”

After being lost in sensation for a while, Yuder quickly drew back his hand as if it had touched fire.

‘What the hell.’

His breathing became heavy. The fact that he had not even noticed his breathing change was a bit shocking. Kishiar silently looked at the empty hand that had retreated.

“How do you feel?”

“Excuse me?”

“Do you not feel anything?”

“…”

He couldn’t deny it since he had already felt the same sensation. The strange attraction was so strong that for the first time, Yuder Ail, who was fearless, wanted to push it away first.

The temptation to lean into the intoxicatingly sweet sensation, the heat that seemed to whisper that it was natural, like the flames of hell itself.

Despite pushing it away, his now cooled hand felt a strange regret. The fact that he was feeling regret was unfamiliar.

“What kind of response are you expecting?”

Confused mumbles flowed between his lips.

“It’s not just me.”

Kishiar replied.

“Aren’t you also attracted to me?”

Thump. His heart pounded as if on the day of his manifestation. Yuder, before understanding what it was, promptly stood up from his place.

“I will take my leave now.”

“Are you leaving like that? Without receiving any treatment.”

“I will receive it from Priest Lusan.”

“Well. That can work too.”

After saying this, Kishiar picked up the gloves he had placed on the table and smiled.

“You should put these back on.”

“…”

Without a word, Yuder took the gloves from his hand. As he was putting on the gloves again, Kishiar too, rose from his seat. His movements were so leisurely that it gave the illusion of a large beast getting up. Yuder silently bowed his head towards him in greeting.

“Yuder.”

But before he could take a few steps, a slow, sinking voice came from behind him.

His steps halted as if a leash had suddenly caught hold of a dog.

“Am I still as scary as back then?”

“…No.”

After a moment of hesitation, Yuder barely managed to open his mouth and reply.

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Chapter 200

“So, it appears you’re afraid of something else.”

He had just managed to reach the doorknob when he was halted again by an unexpected voice that resonated in his ear. Yuder barely managed to suppress the urge to turn his head. Even at this moment, the force compelling him was vehemently whispering that he should look back.

“Well, no matter. As I’ve said before, I enjoy breaking through walls…”

He felt the slow approach of footsteps. He thought he should step forward to avoid him, but his feet remained unmoving, as though they were stuck to the ground.

And finally, Kishiar came to a halt right behind him.

“Different times are needed to reach certainty, after all.”

Through the light streaming in from the window, Yuder saw his own shadow being completely overlaid by Kishiar’s tall form. Their two small shadows on the dark blue door intertwined and stretched out, merging into a single, dark mass. The sight was obscenely strange. The door lay before him, Kishiar behind him. Trapped in between, his mouth grew dry.

To clear his spinning head, Yuder clenched his fists and closed then opened his eyes.

This was merely an extension of the impulses formed due to their overly intense influence on each other during his second gender manifestation. As time passed, this would surely fade, and they could laugh and converse as if it had never happened. It was nothing.

This trembling and heat he felt now would be forgotten later.

‘What’s important are the tasks ahead, not this.’

But what if it wasn’t?

A snake-like voice whispered in his heart.

Can you truly guarantee it will become nothing, Yuder Aile?

Kishiar made it clear that he had no intention of backing down until he achieved what he wanted. He was originally a genius at methodically manipulating and releasing his targets until he achieved his goal. If such a person continuously pushed, could Yuder Aile truly resist and refuse him to the end?

‘…I probably can’t.’

The answer came very simply.

Running away right now was possible. He had always managed to evade this way so far. But every time he backed down from Kishiar, each subsequent confrontation resulted in an even more intense pull, striking him like a punishment.

As long as the flame he had already felt did not extinguish, it was impossible to escape from this impulse. His instincts made that decision.

‘I was too naive.’

Yuder began to regret thinking it would be so easy to stand by Kishiar’s side to protect him. He had thought that he wouldn’t feel anything upon meeting him again due to the emotions from his past life fading. But it wasn’t so.

The man he met again was much more vivid and human than the faint figure in his memories, so charming that it would be strange not

to be drawn to him. Yuder realized the fact that he could feel such overwhelming emotions towards someone other than himself only when he met him again by rewinding time.

The emotions awakened by Kishiar La Orr were all things that Yuder Aile hadn’t even thought could exist within him.

Neither of them was in heat, and their second gender manifestation had long passed. Yet, this moment by his side felt different in every way from being with anyone else. It felt as though all the desires he had been striving not to acknowledge were abruptly flipped over, revealing their bare, bright red faces.

Frankly, he wasn’t sure how long he could resist.

If things continued this way, he would undoubtedly lose control of his body, his emotions. The fact that he knew this frightened him.

“When we touch. When we’re conversing.”

A hand approached Yuder’s silent shoulder, gently touching the door as if to interrupt his train of thought.

“Sometimes, I feel like you’re the only one in this world who is like me.

Kishiars breath tickled the back of his neck. At the same time, the shadows overlapping the door blurred.

“I feel a relief, a profound liberation that I hadn’t experienced before. It’s a sweet and pleasurable sensation.”

Yuder exhaled thinly, feeling the sensation of Kishiar’s hair on his shoulder tickling the back of his neck as though it was a distant sensation.

“I find it amusing to contemplate how much I can show you. I’m looking forward to the next part. And sometimes, I find myself parched with desire, wanting more.”

“…”

“Am I the only one who feels this?”

Could he say that he wasn’t captivated by him?

Yuder loosened the tense gaze that he had kept on the closed door and the hand resting upon it. A deep sigh naturally slipped out.

‘Damn it.’

Would it have been better if all he wanted was his body, just a primal urge, just like in his past life?

How could one make a cold judgment after hearing such words? The heat began to rise again in his head, which he thought he had barely managed to cool down.

Turn around. Turn around now. You want to see it, don’t you? How could you resist the opportunity to touch something so captivating? The urge continuously prickled beneath his skin, clouding his mind.

“…I think, this is wrong.”

At the words he barely managed to spit out, the weight of the head resting on his shoulder felt a little heavier. Yuder endured that weight, murmuring very quietly and slowly.

“That’s why, even though I think I should leave…”

“…”

“It’s difficult. I…”

“Then try leaving.”

A brief phrase that wasn’t an order whispered with a hotter heat than ever before.

“It’s okay if you don’t confirm right now. If you leave, I’ll let you go immediately. But if you turn around now.”

The force from Kishiar’s fingers resting above the door increased. A low voice gently covered his ear, enticing him.

“Then, I’ll kiss you according to my conviction.”

A shocking shiver ran down his spine. The moment he turned around, he couldn’t tell if it was out of surprise or because he wanted to confirm the face of Kishiar who had uttered those words.

All he knew was that his head turned unconsciously, and at that moment, the predator who had been waiting pounced as he had forewarned.

Ah.

A faint exclamation echoed in his head before fading away.

His mind faded in and out in the ensuing silence. When he regained his senses, Yuder found himself trapped between the door and Kishiar, embraced at the waist by one hand, receiving his kiss.

‘It’s hot.’

Their overlapped lips were so hot that it felt as if he had been burned. The breath he exhaled, the breath he inhaled, all were stolen by the massive serpent of a man in front of him. He wondered if the mixed heat was turning his head to mush, but such thoughts were sucked into the descending lips and disappeared almost immediately.

Had he ever kissed him like this before?

He wasn’t sure. The pains of his previous life that always unsettled his heart weren’t coming to mind at all right now.

All that could be felt was a firm hand encircling his waist and the sensation of the stiff door against his back. His crimson eyes brimmed with a savage joy as if he’d finally obtained the thing he coveted most.

And within that joy was his own reflection, equally consumed by a ruthless desire, his mind solely focused on satiating his hunger as he clung to his neck.

—

“Hey, Yuder! Snap out of it.”

At the sharp summons, Yuder, about to naturally drop his cup into the soup bowl, caught it just in time and placed it back on the table.

“Couldn’t sleep last night? What’s up?”

Devran, whom he’d run into at the dining hall, studied Yuder’s complexion suspiciously as if expecting some kind of mishap.

“Nothing’s wrong. Just lost in thought.”

“Your lips look awfully chapped. Are you sure nothing’s wrong?”

“…”

Instead of replying, Yuder raised his hand to touch his lips. He could feel a faint stinging pain indeed.

“If you’re tired, there’s no need to supervise the others’ training. You should take a break. You’re such a workaholic. Who else would

have let pass an opportunity to rest for two weeks after the manifestation?”

He wasn’t tired. That was the truth. But he couldn’t tell Devran the real reason behind his chapped lips, so Yuder wordlessly swallowed a spoonful of soup. His mouth felt unusually sensitive, subtle sensations making themselves felt from all corners.

These unfamiliar sensations reminded him of the incident the previous day, making his mood even stranger. He ended up eating far less than usual and concluded his meal.

“Are you really not going to the medical division?”

“No need.”

As he dismissed Devran’s concern with a shake of his head, the latter scrunched his brow in disapproval.

“So, there’s only one reason, after all.”

“…”

“If this is because of the trial of the Apeto, stop worrying so much. Father and Dermilla, who’ve come up to the capital, are fine. Why should we fret? You appear unaffected, but you’re pretty sentimental, after all.”

Yuder wondered if Devran had detected something, but apparently not. Devran, confident in his misinterpretation, began an unending monologue about the Hartan people who’d come up to the capital to answer the summons of Kishiar, their families, and the upcoming second trial, patting Yuder’s back all the while.

“Everyone was extremely tense the first time. But after witnessing the ruckus once, everyone’s anger seems to have given them

energy. They're all set to testify every detail of the events from that time, whatever happens this time."

"…That's good."

"It's all thanks to the Commander. Who else but him could provide such a prestigious mansion as a safehouse for all those people to rest without attracting attention?"

On the day of the first trial, Yuder, occupied with the manifestation, had stayed in the palace and hadn't heard properly about those who'd come up to testify. But judging by Devran's reaction, it seemed like Kishiar had taken care of their protection and preparation for the trial.

"Even if the second prince of Apeto is dead, we haven't forgotten a thing. We're definitely going to see those bastards fall."

So cheer up!

With these off-target words of comfort, Devran left the dining hall in high spirits. Yuder watched his retreating figure, let out a small sigh, and turned his gaze toward the window. The sky was clear, and the sound of the members training outside was peaceful.

Today, the only thing out of the ordinary here seemed to be Yuder Aile.

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Chapter 201

Even as he left the dining hall and walked down the hallway, and even as he descended towards the training grounds, remnants of yesterday's memories still floated around a corner of his mind.

The fervor in the gaze that met his after he had finally detached from what he had clung to with such desperate longing for an indeterminate amount of time. The revelation of a deeper desire, manifested through his rapid, racing breath. The sensation of fingertips tenderly brushing his lips the moment he closed his eyes, unable to bear the wild unknown tumult within him. The soft laughter that echoed in his ears after he shook his head in response to the query, "Do you need healing?", before he even fully registered the profoundly quiet voice. The ticklish breath he felt over his skin. Once these memories began to surface, they lined up, one after the other, and he found it absolutely impossible to stop them.

Yesterday, Kishiar definitely proved he was right. Yuder was still unsure how to describe the vast and deep sense of unity he felt the moment he connected with him.

It was a surreal sensation, as if everything in the world had existed for that moment. The memory of that feeling was so powerful, surpassing simple stimuli and pleasure, that he even began to entertain the peculiar thought that he was currently dreaming, and that his body was still in the dressing room.

'It feels like my brain is paralyzed.'

He was aware of what he had done. However, he felt neither the expected guilt nor revulsion. Indeed, his mind must have been properly paralyzed at that time.

Walking somewhat unsteadily, as though the ground beneath him was floating, Yuder stopped when he spotted the entrance to the Imperial Knight's first training ground not far away. There was no real need to come this far, but he didn't want to head to the usual Cavalry training grounds at the back today. Part of him was reluctant to run into Kishiar so soon. If he couldn't concentrate properly, it would be better not to show up at all. He intended to calm his mind before entering.

'Enough thinking for now.'

At this time, the first training ground would be filled with Shin Division members struggling to control their remaining strength. Being with them, he should be able to regain his composure quickly.

However, having composed himself and entered the training ground, Yuder was met with an unexpected situation and stopped in his tracks once again.

"Do it properly, everyone!"

"You're the one who can't even lift a finger but talks a lot!"

The training ground was in far more chaos than usual. All the members were simultaneously unleashing their abilities. As expected of the Shin Division members, who mostly possessed physical enhancement abilities or the ability to infuse energy into weapons, each attack they swung seemed powerful enough to shatter the entire training ground, but the ground engraved with protective magic was perfectly intact.

And in the midst of all this was Kishiar. Not as an attacker, but as the sole target.

"Is this all you've got? I wonder where the spirit from earlier went."

“Ugh. Not yet!”

At Kishiar’s smiling words, dressed in a dust-free light training uniform and holding only a wooden sword, a Shin Division member screamed and threw a stone with all his might. He had the ability to infuse power into thrown objects, making them faster than arrows and causing them to explode.

The stone he threw, wrapped in blue energy, rushed towards Kishiar’s chest in the blink of an eye, but Kishiar easily blocked the attack with a simple extension of his bare hand.

As the stone hit his palm and exploded, scattering in all directions, the Shin Division members each cursed and rolled their bodies to avoid the fragments.

“How many times have I said it? When it explodes, we’re the ones who suffer!”

“That crazy bastard! I’ll kill you first!”

“Let’s stop fighting amongst ourselves!”

“Seems like you still had some focus to spare to look elsewhere.”

Upon discovering the squabbling members, Kishiar muttered under his breath and sprung into action. He effortlessly dodged several incoming attacks with minimal movements and appeared in front of the brawling members in the blink of an eye, looking as if he had just taken flight off the ground. Everyone gasped, taken aback by his sudden appearance. Although it looked like he had teleported, he had merely moved at a speed that deceived their perception.

“I told you to train, not to fight.”

Kishiar, admonishing them like children, lightly patted the backs of a couple of surprised members with both hands. Of course, it only

looked light to the onlooker, but the recipients were sent flying from one end of the training field to the other without even having a chance to scream, such was the overwhelming force.

‘What the hell…’

Why was Kishiar, who should’ve been busy with scheduled training, among them, and what exactly was happening? As he watched in stunned silence, Yuder turned his head and saw Jimmy, lying nearby, panting with a worn-out look on his face.

“Jimmy.”

“Ah, Yuder.”

Upon recognizing Yuder, Jimmy quickly wiped off his sweat and sat up.

“What’s going on here?”

“Commander suddenly said he wanted to join the training. He said he’s been feeling rusty from not moving for a long time and encouraged us all to attack him.”

At first, the Shin Division members laughed, thinking it was a joke, but their smiles quickly faded when they saw the Commander easily take down a few members who had rushed him. Until now, Kishiar had never really shown his full capabilities in front of everyone apart from participating in basic training. Several members who had been under the mistaken impression that he might not be that powerful had a rude awakening.

“You’re still on your break, right, Yuder?”

“Yes.”

“It’s a shame. We could’ve seen who’s stronger, you or the Commander.”

“…You wanted to see that?”

“Of course!”

Jimmy, answering with sparkling eyes, suddenly scrutinized Yuder’s face.

“Hmm? But Yuder, what happened to your lips? Did you get hurt?”

””

Judging by Jimmy and Devran’s reactions, his chapped lips were quite noticeable.

“It’s nothing. Just a bit…tired.”

“Hmm. I see…”

The boy who had been tilting his head started to scratch it and chuckled.

“The Commander also had a wound on his lower lip today. Maybe it’s because of the changing season.”

Saying that he’d rested enough and was going back, the boy who had been rolling on the ground holding a practice sword walked past Yuder, failing to catch the rare look of embarrassment that flitted across Yuder’s face.

“…You’re going again?”

“Of course. Opportunities to challenge someone as powerful as the Commander with all our might are rare. I’m going to do it till the very end!”

Hearing the shout, Kishiar, who was far away, turned his head and spotted Jimmy and Yuder behind him. Yuder's eyes tensed at the moment their gazes met, but no one noticed.

And shortly thereafter, Kishiar, as usual, waved his hand and squinted his eyes into a smile. It was but a fleeting moment, barely enough time for him to dodge Jimmy's onslaught and throw himself backward, but it was more than sufficient to calm the chaos that had been swirling in Yuder Aile's head.

'…He hasn't changed.'

A quiet voice echoed in his tranquil heart.

Kishiar's demeanor hadn't changed one bit from yesterday. He was still smiling at Yuder, with no hint of falsehood in his gaze.

He was vastly different from the image of him lingering in Yuder's memory after the manifestation incident during his previous life. Could this man, who had just beamed as if light crowned his head, be the same man who had despaired in silence, forcing a smile onto his parched lips then?

The fact that everything was indeed changing from his previous life had finally hit him.

'…Yes.'

Yesterday's events were not accidents but transpired entirely due to his and the man's will. It couldn't have been the same as before.

A bittersweet sense of liberation blossomed from within his chest. Yuder briefly let slip a smile akin to a sigh, but quickly extinguished it. He bowed his head.

"I feel refreshed after a good workout."

Sometime later, Kishiar approached Yuder, leaving the Shin Division members sprawling behind him, rotating his shoulder. Unlike the Shin Division members smeared with sweat and dirt, he looked composed, with only a trace of sweat on his forehead.

“I’m sorry, you came to watch training, but now there’s nothing for you to do.”

Yuder responded as usual to Kishiar’s ever-composed demeanor that showed no trace of yesterday’s passion.

“No, your personal involvement would have been a better experience than mere training. But…”

After confirming there was no one around to overhear their conversation, Yuder lowered his voice.

“Is it alright for you to use your power like this?”

Kishiar’s ability as an Awakener was not as flashy or noticeable as others, but each small movement carried an overwhelming power that was unmatched. Even Yuder, who had seen him fight monsters in his previous life, could not fully comprehend the extent of his power. How could the inexperienced Shin Division members stand a chance against him?

The worry was whether he would again suffer physical distress from using his ability, just as he had after casting magic before.

“It’s fine. When the heat period is nearing, I need to use it more than usual. Leaving the power idle can be more harmful.”

“I see. I apologize if my concern was presumptuous.”

“Presumptuous, you say. It feels good to be worried about. I usually don’t like it, but when it’s you, it feels quite nice.”

Kishiar, who made this fortunate remark when no one else could hear, gestured and began to walk ahead.

“Shall we head back together? It’s going to take them some time to regain their senses.”

Yuder glanced at the Shin Division members, swallowed his slight feeling of guilt, and nodded.

“Understood.”

Not long after they left the training grounds, they saw Imperial Knights pretending not to see them while giving them disdainful looks and disappearing into the distance.

‘They don’t even bother with a greeting.’

Despite being members of a knight’s order created to protect the imperial family, their insolence was hard to believe. However, Kishiar didn’t pay them any mind. As an assistant, there wasn’t much Yuder could do if his Commander did not approve, but he made a mental note of their attitudes.

‘Someday, I’ll have to deal with all those guys and make sure they greet us eagerly, even at the sight of Kishiar’s shadow.’

“Duke.”

Not long after they started walking, Nathan Zuckerman appeared with a brisk stride. He walked straight towards Kishiar, offered a silent bow in greeting, and then spoke up again.

“You must return to the office immediately.”

“What’s the matter?”

“The first son of Apeto has paid a visit.”

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“The first son of Apeto has arrived.”

Upon hearing the awaited fish had bitten the bait and come, Kishiar’s eyes shifted.

“Indeed… he arrived at a perfect time. Has Revlin been informed of his arrival?”

“Yes. He was notified right before the guest arrived. He said he would wait within the lodging to come at your immediate call.”

The youngest of the Apeto house, the third son Revlin, was living freely within the Cavalry as a temporary member, but he never forgot his original place. Kishiar had already warned Revlin, anticipating Aishes from the Apeto House would visit the Cavalry sometime.

“Good. It’s unlikely I’ll need to call him, but just in case.”

Kishiar, satisfied, nodded and headed towards the Cavalry quarters.

Aishes Shand Apeto, the first son of the Apeto House, arrived, his face concealed by a cape, accompanied only by a single servant. The young man waiting in the guest reception room, unable to hide his tension, jumped to his feet at the sight of Kishiar in training attire entering the room, flanked by Nathan and Yuder.

“I apologize for visiting so suddenly, Your Highness. Due to avoiding the gaze of my family, I found it difficult to notify you in advance.”

“That’s fine. It’s rather I who should apologize for greeting a guest in such attire due to training. Please, come in.”

Yuder followed them, scrutinizing Aishes' face discreetly. His features didn't much resemble his other brothers', but his noticeable golden eyes and sensitive demeanor made their shared bloodline instantly apparent.

He had seen his letters and heard much about him, but this was the first time he had seen Aishes in person, in this life or the previous.

'So this is eldest sibling Aishes… He does look frail indeed. The servant he brought seems quite strong… probably not an Awakener, maybe a disguised knight.'

Though Aishes was trying his best to climb the stairs with dignity, to avoid being underestimated by Kishiar, his increasingly labored breath could not be hidden. It was pitiable to see the noble youth struggling even under the weight of his expensive cape. Yuder, taking his eyes off him, quietly continued his stride.

"Firstly… I'd like to inform you that, upon our independent investigation of Lenore's body, our Apeto family has concluded that there was no discrepancy with what Duke Peletta stated at the funeral."

Finally arriving at the Commander's room, Aishes, looking considerably more tired than before, drained a cup of water before opening his mouth.

"In fact, before Lenore ended up this way, the Bright Palace had sent commemorative gifts for the harvest festival separately to my residence where I stay and to the Apeto main residence. Since the gifts were sent secretly, both my father and I were unaware that the other had received such a gift."

Inside the gifts sent from the Bright Palace, where the Crown Prince resided, was a poem subtly implying a desire for a good

relationship regardless of the surroundings and expensive medicinal herbs for the body.

Aishes naturally assumed the gift was sent by the Diarca family using the Crown Prince's name. If they were favoring Aishes over Lenore, his competitor, then it was only right to join hands with them.

Duke Apeto also harbored similar thoughts. The only minor difference was that he had perceived his involvement in the trial linked to the Apeto family as a promise of significant assistance from the Diarca family in the future. But circumstances changed following Lenore's funeral.

If the person who had killed Lenore was Kishiar, as initially suspected, they could have exerted pressure on the Emperor by joining forces with the Crown Prince and the Diarca family, tilting the trial in their favor. However, Kishiar himself appeared at Lenore's funeral, dramatically revealing that he was not the killer and presenting irrefutable evidence that the real culprit was the Crown Prince, who had plotted against him.

The funeral attendees were loose-lipped, and rumors spread rapidly. Some still suspected Kishiar, but the majority believed that the Crown Prince had conspired with the Diarca family to deceive Apeto.

As Duke Apeto thought the same, he was understandably furious. Repeated examinations of Lenore's body only proved Kishiar's innocence. The Crown Prince, whom he had contacted to ascertain the truth, only denied any involvement and did not provide any solid evidence. Even though the Diarca family claimed they were not involved, Duke Apeto did not believe them.

'Of course, Lenore's death might have given me some advantage in the trial! But I cannot accept the fact that that young Crown Prince has belittled Apeto to such an extent! How dare the Diarca family pit

us against the Emperor openly? If not for them, this wouldn't have happened.'

Duke Apeto, who had always criticized the arrogance of the Diarca family, especially after the Crown Prince's coronation, hardened his heart against them after Lenore's funeral. His temporary tolerance, thinking that Diarca might assist during the trial, froze over completely.

'How much of a laughingstock must we have been for them to pull something like this?'

Rationally, even after this incident, it might have been right to collaborate with the Diarca family or the Crown Prince. But the Crown Prince's cruel and humiliating assassination of Lenore, and his subsequent casual contact with the Apeto family as if seeking an opportunity for friendly relations, added insult to injury for the already fiery Duke Apeto.

The undercurrent of conflict surrounding the Crown Prince's nomination had already severely upset him years ago, and this incident opened those wounds again. Duke Apeto was adamant that the issue was directly tied to the family's honor.

'How can we trust their words when the foundation of our trust has been shaken? Rather than focusing on winning this trial, Apeto should aim to minimize losses. Fighting fiercely would only drain our energy and benefit Diarca! Preserving our strength for the future should be our priority.'

Aishes, the heir to the family, agreed with Duke Apeto. But at the same time, he saw the family decision to not confront the trial head-on as the perfect opportunity to overthrow his father.

Following Lenore's funeral, there were discussions within the Apeto family about revitalizing the family atmosphere through this incident and adopting a healthy heir from outside the family.

The apparent reason was the frail health of Aishes and the absence of Revlin, which were deemed inadequate to secure the succession. But everyone knew the real reason - Duke Apeto had pulled strings to promote his illegitimate child.

Feeling pleased with the established succession, Aishes was deeply unsettled by this maneuver. He knew the Duke of Apeto had no affection for any of his children, but he didn't expect him to strike him in the back like this, especially when the succession was practically decided.

In the end, it seemed both parties had used the trial as an excuse to attack each other. Upon learning this, Aishes resolution quickened.

His perennial weak body was always a hindrance. He felt a sense of urgency to claim the dukedom as soon as possible when his body was in better shape. What came to mind then was the healthy-looking Revlin he saw at the funeral, and Duke Peletta standing beside him.

'After all, considering teaming up with him was part of my initial plan.'

Aishes briefly reported this situation to Kishiar.

"My father has been greatly affected by this incident, and his judgment has declined considerably. He is constantly worried about my health and speaks oddly. As his child, it is quite distressing. Therefore, if the Duke remembers the letter I previously sent, I'd like to offer some help on this matter."

"I've always thought so, but you really are a filial son."

Kishiar responded with a soft smile. Aishes was momentarily mesmerized by his smile before he frowned and regained his senses. That skinny duke certainly had extraordinary looks.

“I appreciate your sentiment. Seeing you again reminds me of the funeral day. Even when the Emperor expressed concern about the incidents that day, the Duke of Diarca refused to stop spreading false rumors, despite being asked to halt.”

“I have already heard about this from Apeto.”

Aishes nodded, furrowing his brow. Yuder, who had not known about this matter, listened carefully.

“If you intend to apply the old saying that silence is the closest brother to oblivion here, I would disagree. Apeto’s pride won’t go down that easily. How could Duke Peletta, whose honor has been damaged, just bury this matter?”

“If it’s your wisdom, I believed you would come to such a conclusion. I have no doubts about your intentions.”

He was convinced that they could continue to have a good relationship. Kishiar extended his hand to the side, and Nathan Zuckerman, as if waiting, respectfully placed a small box in his hand. It was one of the two boxes Yuder had seen the day before, the one containing the thirst-inducing poisonous mushroom.

“Do you know what this is?”

“No.”

“It’s a mushroom that a servant of the Bright Palace smuggled in the day before the party. If you dry it, grind it, and dissolve it in water, it’s absorbed into the body and induces thirst.”

Aishes’s eyes narrowed at Kishiar’s words.

“I see. This is… We tried to find the ingredient, but the news was slow and it was frustrating.”

“I’ll give this as a gift in celebration of today’s meeting. Will you accept it?”

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“Are you… giving this to me?”

Kishiar nodded, catching sight of Aishes’s skeptical gaze. His smile was simply beautiful, free of any discernible intentions. For a moment, Aishes’s golden eyes wavered, revealing a greedy gasp.

The mushroom, as Kishiar described it, was a poison yet unknown to the world. Meaning, as he’d said just before, if dried and turned into powder, it could be used to kill anyone in the same way that Lenore had been killed.

Even his father, Duke Apeto.

“But… how can I accept something so precious that Your Highness must have had trouble acquiring?”

Unabashedly exposing his greedy eyes, Aishes showed a hint of refusal as a matter of courtesy. Kishiar, knowing his intention, responded with a warm smile.

“You’ve gone through a lot of trouble to come here, shouldn’t I at least offer this much? After all, I’ve merely managed to obtain something earlier than it would’ve been available in Apeto. Consider this a small favor from me. Please, don’t decline.”

“In that case…… I accept. I am deeply grateful for Your Highness’s consideration and wisdom.”

Aishes accepted the box with more grace and courtesy than anyone else. He struggled to keep a cold smile from creeping onto his lips.

“I will investigate this thoroughly, even if only to avenge Lenore’s death.”

“I would be pleased if it helped.”

“In fact, I also brought a gift for today’s meeting, albeit a small one.”

“Oh? What is it?”

Showing interest, Kishiar watched as Aishes accepted something from a servant standing beside him.

“Here.”

The object he placed on the table was a folded piece of paper that seemed rather ordinary at first glance. To show that it had no traps or devices, he broke the seal and unfolded it right in front of Kishiar’s eyes.

“It’s a request sent to my father at the time when Lenore and my uncle Beltrail decided to study the Awakeners together. It includes the proposed research site, resident servants, material supply routes, and the estimated costs and items needed. My father gave his approval with a seal. It could be useful in the trial.”

“Incredible.”

Kishiar admired softly as he picked up the paper.

“Where did you get it from? It would’ve been the first thing your family tried to get rid of.”

“Originally, it was something my uncle Beltrail had hidden in his own room within the mansion. After his downfall, while cleaning his room, a priest who happened to be connected to me found it first.”

He was lucky, Aishes simply stated, but Yuder standing behind him subtly sensed the bloodshed that lay hidden behind those words.

‘He says it like that, but he must’ve shed a lot of blood to find that and keep it safe until now.’

That piece of paper was the most concrete evidence that Duke Apeto had openly supported the research of Lenore and Beltrail. A chill involuntarily ran down his spine at Aishes Shand Apeto’s calm demeanor, who was passing the weapon to strike his father’s back to his enemy, all the while wearing an unaffected smile.

“Thank you. I gratefully accept this valuable gift.”

Kishiar folded the paper and flipped it over to Yuder. It was Yuder standing on the left, not the formidable Nathan on the right. Yuder involuntarily turned his eyes toward Nathan. It was a situation where Nathan could have been upset, thinking that their lord had rated Yuder’s strength higher than his. However, Nathan only nodded his head silently and showed no significant change.

‘…The Red Stone Incident really made a lasting impression.’

Yuder silently accepted the paper from Kishiar’s hand.

“And this, I haven’t fully confirmed yet, but I thought I should mention it just in case.”

As soon as Yuder took the paper, Aishes lowered his voice and opened his mouth.

“There are rumors flowing within the family that my father might secretly send a nocturnal visitor to the Bright Palace soon.”

“A nocturnal visitor?”

“Yes. Isn’t it well-known that people of the Apeto family have a temperament as volatile as fire for generations?”

As if he were talking about someone else, even though he was one of the Apetos, Aishes spoke.

“From this incident, I heard whispers of several servant corpses being secretly cleared out from that room. It suggests that he is quite upset. His judgment seems clouded, so he might really do it. It’s just a rumor, but it’s truly worrisome.”

Aishes was talking in a roundabout way, but the ‘rumor’ he spoke of was hardly just a rumor.

‘So the Duke of Apeto is planning to send an assassin to the palace where Prince Katchian lives. He’s giving this information in such a way.’

The smile on Kishiar’s face grew even deeper.

“That’s… quite worrisome indeed.”

“Yes. As his son, it’s not my place to step forward, but I hope that you, Duke Peletta, will reveal the clear truth on our behalf.”

“I will make sure to do so.”

To an outside observer, it was a truly beautiful conversation.

‘So, is it over now?’

They had exchanged gifts, confirmed each other’s intentions, and now it seemed time to stand up. But for some reason, Aishes did not rise from his seat just yet. He requested a warm tea instead of water and kept glancing around the room. His eyes seemed to be looking for something.

Kishiar, watching him, casually opened his mouth.

“Speaking of which… you’ve come all this way. Would you like to meet Revlin? It was so sudden, I didn’t even think about arranging a meeting between you two.”

“Ah…”

Aishes flinched slightly, a subtle expression on his face at the mention of Revlin. Yuder did not miss the hint of jealousy that crossed his eyes.

“No, rather than that. Well……”

The frail young man, his eyes shifting, seemed to make a decision and opened his mouth.

“Your Highness, you said that you were deeply impressed by the letter I sent you some time ago.”

“I did.”

“At that time, I mentioned that while it’s essential for those who deserve punishment to receive it through trial, our Apeto heritage……”

Something seemed difficult for Aishes to express aloud, and he paused momentarily, moistening his dry lips.

“… I said that the foolish acts committed by Lenore and Beltrail due to our ‘Blood of Blessing’ should not be made known to the outside. Do you remember that?”

“I do. Didn’t you ask if I could hand over the confiscated research records in the future because of that?”

Aishes’ eyebrows twitched at the brisk and direct response.

“Yes… Indeed. You did not provide a clear answer on that matter at the time. Might… might you be able to provide an answer today?”

The conversation unfolded precisely as they had anticipated while reading Aishes's letter earlier. Kishiar had criticized Beltrail, who callously sacrificed the lives of the Awakeners in search of a cure for his frailty, as foolish. But in the end, Aishess was no different.

'Didn't it cross his mind that if Beltrail had succeeded in his research, he wouldn't be in his current predicament?'

The self-serving desire apparent in his gaze made Kishiar's insides churn.

Aishes probably didn't realize it, but the Kishiar sitting before him was also enduring a hereditary issue, fighting persistently. Knowing this fact, the sight of the two sitting across each other appeared even more peculiar in Yuder Aile's eyes.

Yuder silently observed the back of Kishiar, lost in thought. Only after a considerable amount of time had passed, time enough for Aishes to grow anxious from the wait, did he open his mouth with a sigh, resting his chin on his hand.

"Well… it's hard to say for sure right now. Although it's a record I've seized, wouldn't it be difficult to decide such a significant matter at my own discretion? To win the trial, we can't overlook this fact. You know this, right, First Prince?"

"I am aware. But don't you think it's cruel to easily expose the history of pain that a family has carried for a long time, especially a family like Apeto?"

Aishes pleaded, clasping his hands.

"Your Highness, do you not know how much those in the name of Shand Apeto have devoted their bodies and minds to serving the Orr Empire? Even though I could be accused of betraying my father and family, I have carried this pain and come this far. Won't you pity me?"

It was a splendid performance, enough to deceive anyone who didn't know his ulterior motives. But Yuder knew that Kishiar was just as good at playing the game.

"What should we do? This is quite… My heart truly aches."

Kishiar, deep in thought and touching his temples, exhaled deeply. In an instant, a scene unfolded before everyone's eyes, akin to a masterpiece painting dubbed 'The Sun God's Sigh of Despair'.

"No one knows better than I do that the First Prince has come this far, prepared for great sacrifices. How could I ignore such dedication?"

"Then… if that's the case…"

Aishes mumbled blankly. It was pitiful to see him trying hard to focus his eyes, not to faint.

"I can't guarantee, but I will try to convince the court to minimize the reference to that issue. And though it's difficult to hand over the official record…"

Kishiar, who had been trailing off and gazing into space, broke into a smile.

"Don't you know? The way to see the evidence doesn't necessarily involve receiving it from me."

"…"

For a moment, Aishes' expression changed peculiarly.

"I've already sent Beltrail's research records to the court. That's all I can tell you."

"I understand."

Aishes couldn’t hide his joyous expression as he quickly stood up from his seat. Yuder felt as though he could guess his next move as clearly as the back of his hand.

‘He probably thinks that he can easily get his hands on the evidence submitted to the court by bribing someone.’

“I appreciate your advice, Your Highness. I should be on my way. Given that I had to avoid the family’s prying eyes to come here, I cannot stay long…”

“I am aware.”

Aishes swiftly disappeared with his servant. His unconcerned demeanor was striking, even though the tea he had requested hadn’t arrived yet.

“Yuder, would you return that paper to me?”

As soon as Aishes was gone, Kishiar, who had been tense, relaxed back in his chair and extended his hand toward Yuder. Faced with Kishiar’s playful, childlike eyes sparkling with mischief, Yuder handed over the paper and finally broke his silence.

“Sir, did you really send the research records to the court?”

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“Commander, did you truly send the research records to the court?”

“I did. The judges should see the evidence, shouldn’t they? Although, they won’t get the results that the first prince expected.”

Kishiar replied, chuckling as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

‘As expected.’

He knew it. He had speculated that the reason Kishiar, who said he wouldn’t hand the records over to Aishes, openly threw him a bone was that he’d already tampered with them.

“Did you omit some parts before sending them? Or maybe…”

“I did that, but well… I paid attention to some other areas as well.”

A meaningful look surfaced on Kishiar’s face. Yuder probed further to confirm the details.

“What other areas are you referring to?”

“I erased some sections, including the observation records of the test subjects who were sacrificed, and replaced them with false information to ensure that those who saw the records wouldn’t entertain useless thoughts. I left room for Beltrail’s delusions, thinking they might somehow be useful.”

Beltrail had not obtained the results he initially desired through his research. Yet the detailed records left behind from the

experimentation on the Awakeners had too much potential for misuse. Hence, Kishiar explained, he had not hesitated to remove that part.

“If they accept that the research was in vain, nothing will happen. But if they can’t and get greedy, they’ll experience something rather unpleasant. And, while I’ve taken care of this and that… we don’t know how things will turn out, so I plan to observe the situation.”

In his previous life, there had been no trial revealing the dishonors of the Apeto family, and Lenore’s records had disappeared without ever coming to light after he became a duke. But this time was different. The future was unpredictable, with no idea what changes the trial would bring. However, seeing Kishiar’s secretive smile, Yuder wasn’t worried about what might come next.

“If the first prince accepts his uncle’s failure and looks for a different answer, the same thing won’t happen again. But who knows?”

Many people can’t let go of their desires, even when they discover that the path they’ve found is a bloody, worthless one. Yuder recalled Aishes, who was delighted at the thought of getting Beltrail’s records. Perhaps he would walk the same path as Beltrail and Lenore, even after witnessing their failures.

‘And if nothing changes, he will die again.’

Aishes might be thrilled now at the prospect of getting Beltrail’s records. It might be unfortunate, but Yuder didn’t feel sorry for him.

“I must say, going through and filtering all those rubbish writings was quite a difficult task, even for me who can read and memorize dozens of books overnight. It felt like my mind was getting polluted.”

Whether he intended to change the subject or not, Kishiar steered the conversation elsewhere. Yuder pulled his thoughts away

from the dark future awaiting Aishes and looked at Kishiar.

“The Awakeners who will live in the future should be thankful to you, Commander.”

It was a thoughtless response, but for some reason, Kishiar blinked in surprise a few times before breaking into laughter.

“If you say that, it makes me feel embarrassed for having been so petulant. I just did what I should’ve done; there’s no grand significance to it.”

“I didn’t mean any grand significance either; I was just stating the facts.”

“…”

The laughter on Kishiar’s face, who had been looking up at Yuder from the couch, suddenly vanished.

“Do you really think so?”

“Yes.”

A moment of silence passed. Only then did Yuder notice the small wound beneath Kishiar’s tightly closed lips. It was quite eye-catching now that he recognized it, though he hadn’t noticed when Kishiar was laughing.

‘Ah, so that’s what Jimmy was talking about…’

Why hadn’t Kishiar treated it? Why had he been walking around like that? Some members might not have noticed it, but some, like Jimmy, must have recognized it at first glance.

As he tried to avert his eyes from the slender red line, his heart oddly fluttered, and Kishiar’s low sigh penetrated his ears.

“Hmm… I thought I was pretty good at not letting personal feelings interfere when I work.”

It’s getting harder and harder.

The last sentence was so small it was doubtful whether he heard it correctly. As he blinked, caught in a paradoxical feeling of wanting to ask but knowing he shouldn’t, Kishiar let out a short breath that sounded like a chuckle.

“Yuder.”

“Yes.”

“Could you come here? Closer.”

Suddenly, the previously soft atmosphere shifted. His deeply attached voice brought back the events of yesterday that Yuder had tried to erase from his mind.

Without realizing it, Yuder swallowed and looked behind him. It was an instinctual reaction. Nathan Zuckerman, who had gone to get the tea Aishes had requested just before leaving, had not yet returned. There was no sign of him.

“Why are you like that?”

“…No reason.”

Only after confirming that did Yuder slowly move his steps closer to Kishiar, who seemed to be waiting and extended his hand.

“Turn your face this way.”

Yuder hesitated for a moment, then chose to kneel instead of bending his waist. As he silently lowered his body, his knee touching the ground next to the chair, the approaching hand touched the area

beneath his lips. It was a touch as light as a feather, but his sensitive lips registered it as a sharp pain.

As he scrunched up his brow several times, as if this was amusing, Kishiar chuckled.

“Did you walk around like this all day?”

“…Yes.”

“It must have hurt.”

“It was okay.”

Even though he said it was okay, he lacked the usual confidence.

“You’re aware you present a rather provocative image, aren’t you?”

“…”

Shouldn’t that comment be directed more toward Kishiar himself?

Yuder, looking down at the fingertips brushing his lips, impulsively opened his mouth.

“Commander, why didn’t you treat it?”

“Hmm?”

“The wound under your lip.”

“Oh, this?”

Kishiar slowly touched the area under his lip with his other hand. It was such a small movement, yet confronting it made his heart feel constricted, a difficult sensation.

“Of course, to remember.”

His heated gaze stared directly at Yuder.

“To remember what…?”

“Yesterday’s moment.”

Suddenly, the inside of Yuder’s lips touched by Kishiar’s hand felt searing hot, as if it had been touched by a flame. His throat burned sharply as if he had swallowed hot sand, too astonished to react. The sudden thirst startled him, the sensation of his lower tongue swelling and becoming wet caused him to unconsciously open his mouth, and as if he’d been waiting for it, Kishiar leaned in.

…

The kiss this time was brief, yet it was as hot as it had been the previous night.

Did it hurt?

No.

Then, I suppose it’s alright to do it one more time.

Answering his question was a mistake because the moment he answered, Kishiar delved into his lips once more, nibbling lightly on the bottom lip.

A moment later, Kishiar entirely released him. Yuder, unable to meet Kishiar’s amused gaze, let out a sigh.

This is driving me mad.

Last night, he was half inebriated with heat, but today, even while sober, he couldn’t think of anything else. Was he always this

vulnerable to desire? No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t tear his eyes away from Kishiar’s moist lips.

What do you think about getting treated before Nathan comes back?

Yuder saw his reflection in his eyes. He inevitably couldn’t refuse his suggestion.

—

Your Highness.

Ignoring the voice calling out to him from beyond the door, Prince Katchian continued to gaze out the window. Still, the voice, persistent, kept resonating.

Your Highness, Crown Prince, please open the door. I heard you have not eaten anything since last night. I brought your favorite food; please do not harm your precious body.

Your Highness, Your Highness. Although it appeared as if the person was concerned about him, Katchian knew well that the feelings underlying those words were closer to anger and irritation. Blocking out the noisy voice, he rose from his place.

The one servant, who had always stood faithfully by his side in Bright Palace, tracked his movements with anxious eyes. Even that loyal gaze was now distasteful to him. In fact, nothing was to his liking at this moment.

Your Highness Its been several hours. Please, at least eat something

If you dont want to be kicked out, you will keep your mouth shut.

Katchian walked past the bowing servant and approached the large, beautiful mirror, made to reflect one's entire figure. Everything in Bright Palace seemed old and ordinary, except for this mirror, which stood out as a new object. It was the only item he had brought when he first moved to the palace after becoming the Crown Prince.

Katchian stared at his reflection. Brilliant golden hair fitting for the imperial palace, a face as beautiful as a flower, thin limbs of a boy not yet fully grown. There was not a single aspect that wasnt radiant.

Except for his eyes, captured by a cold fury.

Do you know who gave me this mirror?

It was I heard it was His Highness, Duke Diarca.

Yes.

Katchians lips curled into a derisive smile, reflecting in the mirror.

He sent me this, telling me to reflect on my status every day.

Excuse me?

The servant trembled and questioned, but Katchian didnt reply.

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Katchian, who had silently been staring at his reflection in the mirror, finally turned away when the ceaseless knocking from outside finally stopped.

“At last, some peace.”

The gaze of the boy, slowly moving away, was noticeably colder and darker than before. He stared at the now silent door for a moment before shortly directing his order to his servant.

“I have a headache. Bring me the cold tea brewed with Ponegri.”

“B-but your highness, you’ve had nothing else, if you drink the potent Ponegri tea again…”

“…You.”

Already seated, Katchian called out to the servant with a blank expression.

“The sole reason I let you in here wasn’t for your trivial concerns. Just do as I say.”

“…”

In the end, the servant could not respond, retreating to bring the Ponegri tea, the only thing the Crown Prince had sought since yesterday. Ponegri was a substance made by diluting the potent narcotic components of the Ponesa plant to edible levels, famed for its ability to subdue severe pain instantly. The cultivation and distribution of Ponesa were strictly controlled and naturally illegal, but the aristocracy secretly procured it, adding it to tea or alcohol for its mood-enhancing effects.

And Crown Prince Katchian was one among them, seeking Ponegri whenever he felt discomfort. With a long sigh, he closed his eyes after gulping down the tea laced with Ponegri, smuggled from the Diarca Duchy. The muscles of his face, which had been tense, began to relax as the effects of the drug kicked in, his eyelids quivering slightly.

"… How in the world did they find out?"

The servant, startled by Katchian's low, muttered question after a few more sips, bowed his head.

"What are… what are you referring to, your highness?"

"The powder made from the Dudureli mushroom you brought from the Western Valley."

With his eyes still closed, Katchian murmured vaguely, gently touching his teacup.

"There's no way any of the aristocrats knew about its effects… How did they catch onto us so quickly? I've thought about it over and over since that day, but I still can't figure it out."

How did they find out? Who revealed to Duke Peletta the nature of the not-so-toxic poison and helped exonerate him from the false accusation of killing Lenore? Ever since Kishiar appeared at Lenore Shand Apeto's funeral and turned everything upside down, Katchian had been locked in his room, incessantly pondering over this.

"No matter how much I think about it, there's no way they could've suspected anything from the letter I sent to Lenore Shand Apeto. Nothing happened on the day of the party either. Everything concluded just as expected, except for a few fools fainting upon meeting the armored knight…"

In fact, a few of them had fainted due to being hit by the button of Yuder, but Katchian did not know that all of it was bundled together as the fault of the armored knight that appeared afterward. As he kept tapping the end of his teacup and gnawing his lip, he soon succumbed to the dizziness induced by the drug and sprawled out. The servant, surprised by his state, approached cautiously and lightly grasped his shoulder.

"… Your Highness, are you alright? Your Highness."

"Quiet… Don't touch me."

Despite his slightly slurred speech, his eyes were still fiercely intimidating. He harshly brushed off the servant's hand and slumped down, burying his face in his palms. With every deep breath he took, his head became increasingly foggy.

There was nothing more comforting than this tea when he did not want to think about anything. Especially when he wanted to escape from the noisy world outside and hide away inside his shell.

"Did I start things too early?"

No matter what he thought, the end was always the same. It was regret for the recent incident when he decided to step forward for the first time to put Duke Peletta away.

"I was certain it would be successful."

After becoming the Crown Prince, Katchian was always behind the Diarca family, no matter what happened. It was only natural, since Diarca had put him in that position. But, in reality, he had faith in the immense power of Duke Diarca. He always observed everything from behind Duke Diarca and learned political maneuvers over the Duke's shoulder that would be useful when he became the Emperor.

However, ever since Duke Peletta created a ridiculous Cavalry and took the lead, the influence of Duke Diarca, which he believed would remain unchanging, began to wobble strangely.

New winds blew into the capital continuously since he successfully retrieved the Red Stone. Duke Diarca, who had a lot, talked about passing it over as if these matters weren't significant, but it wasn't the same for Katchian. For him, there was only the precarious position of the Crown Prince. The feelings he began to experience after the Cavalry was formed were different from the irritation he had felt occasionally from the Emperor and Duke Peletta until now.

"His Highness may be worried, but if we act excessively, it may rather give them a chance. Now, the answer is just to wait. Victory will come to you if you just stay still."

What did he know? To Katchian, these words only sounded like a relaxed caution of someone whose footing was stable.

On the festival day when Duke Diarca failed in front of Katchian for the first time, the young Crown Prince was greatly disappointed inside. He began to think for the first time that Duke Diarca, who always seemed so immense, might actually be nothing special. The plans for that day were not prepared over a long time according to Duke Diarca's way. It was a messy plan hastily created to soothe Katchian, who was wary of Duke Peletta. It was impossible for it to be successful.

Even afterward, Duke Diarca's plans continued to fail throughout the festival. Each time he heard news that the accusations he tried to frame on the Cavalry had come back to them, Katchian was not amused.

Yet, Duke Diarca chose to step back again.

It’s regrettable, but it can’t be helped. We can find a better opportunity next time based on this incident.

When Katchian heard these words, he finally showed the discomfort he had been holding back in front of Duke Diarca.

“You always say the same thing.”

“Your Highness?”

“If you always step back, when and how can we bring down Duke Peletta? Will it be possible only after I’m dead?”

Dismay flickered in Duke Diarca’s eyes at Katchian’s words, who had always just smiled and listened. However, the emotion that appeared in his wrinkled eyes a moment later was a deep disdain and irritation that was bone-chilling.

“Yes, you might think that way. You’re still young, so it can’t be helped. But, Your Highness, please think carefully. Think about the incidents before the Crown Prince was appointed… and who held your hand and brought you to this capital.”

In an instant, Katchian felt the color draining from his face. It was a story that resembled a forbidden tale between them.

“Lately, others have often been talking about whether the Crown Prince position should be chosen again. The important thing is not just the Emperor or Duke Peletta, but rather, isn’t it about this very fact? I am truly worried,” said the aged duke, looking at the pale face of the young Crown Prince.

The old Duke stood up from his seat, smiling kindly. “I shall withdraw. Rather than concerning yourself with such complicated matters, wouldn’t it be better for Your Highness to focus on imperial studies for a while and turn a blind eye to external affairs?”

Katchian carefully kept the emotions he had never revealed to the Duke, who had always defeated him. Even long after he had left, the coldness in his heart remained unhealed.

After the forbidden barrier was broken once, the emotions between Duke Diarca and the Crown Prince began to rapidly escalate. It grew so intense that it felt as if the past had forcibly glued together shattered fragments. A stifling frustration and anger seized Katchian in an instant.

He had never intended to hold hands with Duke Diarca for a lifetime. His life had been a series of desperate struggles to survive. So, what would change if he made the same choice once again?

He couldn’t stay behind Duke Diarca. It was too late to start distancing himself after becoming Emperor. The time was ripe to gradually expand his influence both inside and outside the palace, and to thoroughly examine the relationships between nobles. The incidents involving Duke Peletta, the Cavalry, and Duke Apeto happened to be the perfect catalyst for Katchian’s determination.

He would show Duke Diarca that he was right. He would thrust a sword into the heart of Duke Peletta and the Cavalry and join forces with others who possessed power equal to Diarca. It would be a dangerous tightrope act, but he believed it was better to be on that side than to trust just one person like Duke Diarca.

Alone, he planned and organized everything using only his own strength, utilizing the paths and information he alone knew. The mushrooms were part of that scheme as well. However, Katchian had failed in an unexpected aspect, and he couldn’t figure out the reason.

“No, perhaps it was an anticipated failure from the moment I didn’t know that Lenore Shand Apeto had passed a letter to his younger brother…?”

Even now, there were continuous contact requests from Apeto Duchy and Diarca Duchy, but Katchian didn't want to meet them.

He judged that it would be better to meet and talk, even if it meant playing dumb. However, the fear that arose from shattered pride and the lack of experience in facing a proper failure made it difficult for the immature young Crown Prince to accept it immediately. With even Duke Diarca not visiting, Katchian found it hard to determine how to overcome this obstacle.

And Katchian La Orr couldn't face such a fragile side of himself.

"…In the end, I should lower myself to Diarca's level, reveal the truth, and ask for his help. I will have to give up on building a good relationship with Apeto Duchy from now on."

Just the thought alone sent chills down his spine. If he considered that even Duke Diarca would not come to visit Katchian, his heart grew even colder.

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Chapter 206

Meanwhile, Duke Diarca, who was on Crown Prince Katchian's mind, was with his confidant, Baron Durmand.

"His Highness the Crown Prince is still locked in his room, is he not? This is a serious matter indeed."

As Baron Durmand clicked his tongue, Duke Diarca stroked his beard and spoke.

"Indeed, he is. If he was going to withdraw like this, he should have just remained in my shadow as always. Instead, he's caused a ruckus and doesn't even show the will to rectify it. Who is supposed to fix this mess while he remains silent? Thanks to him, I'm stuck dealing with the bloodthirsty Apeto and Duke Peletta at the same time. I feel like I'm at my wit's end."

"Isn't it a rule of life that, no matter how well-behaved a child is, they tend to cause trouble around this age, due to their overconfidence in their abilities? It's a time when the world seems absurd to them."

"Yes… He just turned 18, didn't he?"

Duke Diarca muttered, as if calculating the Crown Prince's age, and then continued his thought.

"I knew he had become quite arrogant, but I thought he was an asset who knew his place and would exercise patience until he ascended the throne. Yet, he was shaken by such a trivial matter and acted recklessly, without even the slightest hint of shame needed to address the situation. It's a massive disappointment."

Perhaps the issue was that I always treated him like a child.

Duke Diarca mumbled and lit the pipe that was placed on the stand. As the incense within it began to burn, producing smoke, a dizzying aroma filled the room.

“Why on earth did he have to stir up the Apeto? It would have been better if there were no traces left… If due to this incident, those who had stopped mentioning the Crown Prince’s qualifications start speaking again, it will truly be a problem.”

“There’s no way to reverse what has already happened. However, His Highness the Crown Prince will certainly learn a valuable lesson from this terrible failure. Duke, you also got to see a side of him you hadn’t known before because of this incident. Isn’t it rather fortunate that this happened sooner rather than later?”

“You’re right.”

A cold smile spread across the aged Duke Diarca’s face.

“I will ensure that he properly learns his lesson this time. If he dares to dream beyond his station, it is my duty to bring him back to reality.”

“Ah… so that’s why you sent a request to suppress discussion about this incident, even though you knew it would be rejected.”

“Indeed. Thanks to that, even those beneath us are chattering more.”

Duke Diarca took another puff from his pipe and exhaled the smoke with a soft chuckle.

“He has been hiding behind me all this time, only hearing good things and never experiencing defeat, so it’s about time he gets a real taste of the heat,” Duke Diarca said.

“Hahaha. I fear the Crown Prince might end up never leaving the palace, just like His Majesty,” Baron Durmand said, laughing with a face that showed no fear.

“But if you intend to rectify this, wouldn’t you have to drag the Crown Prince out of the palace at least once? Please share a bit of your wisdom with me.”

“Hmph. Well, there’s nothing special. Just do as we always have.”

The gaze of Duke Diarca, who dusted off the ash from his pipe onto a beautiful dish, grew cold.

“Let those Apeto fools destroy themselves, and find someone to take the fall for what the Crown Prince has done.”

“Have you already thought of who it will be?”

“Shouldn’t I tell the Crown Prince to choose directly, so he doesn’t repeat such a reckless act?”

A cunning and cruel glint appeared in his wrinkled eyes.

“He won’t forget the lesson of having to cut off the hands and feet he just made, realizing he did something he shouldn’t have.”

“Indeed… You are wise. So, what will you do about Duke Peletta?”

“I plan to propose to help him win the trial for sure, as he has put quite a bit of effort into this trial.”

“Will he accept it just like that? The evidence is so clear that it’s not a losing trial.”

“What if he doesn’t accept it? Although it’s not a losing trial, sentencing Apeto without our help would be difficult. Apeto lost his

child, but all Duke Peletta lost was a bit of dignity he never had. We can't equate life with dignity. That's sufficient."

The tone of Duke Diarca was so sarcastic, it was hard to believe he was speaking about Imperial family members. Baron Durmand nodded with a refreshed expression.

"If Your Highness says so, then it shall be."

"Ah, flattery suits you as you age."

Despite his words, a brief smile crossed Duke Diarca's face. Baron Durmand quickly seized the moment to express his concerns with an even more anxious voice.

"Truthfully, hasn't Duke Peletta been quite arrogant since creating the Cavalry? I was genuinely worried during the funeral incident, I thought I might see him again."

"Yes. This incident made me become alert about him too. It was indeed a series of surprising events."

Duke Diarca's dark, smoky eyes stared into the hazy void.

"He has become quite arrogant trusting the power of the Cavalry, but they're merely a collection of common ruffians. They must be quite excited now, but what will happen when that power crumbles?"

"You've thought about that part as well."

"Isn't it best to topple those who rely on power with power?"

Duke Diarca's voice echoed in the dark room.

"You've probably heard that monsters keep appearing in the West recently."

"Yes. Ah, then?"

As Baron Durmand seemed to understand something, Duke Diarca continued to explain in a leisurely tone.

“The nations there are already in chaos. I’ve pricked up my ears as it seems even Duke Tain is quite troubled.”

“Indeed An unavoidable request for help, I presume.”

“If the Cavalry that played such a large role this time doesn’t step forward, then who will?”

A laugh wafted through the smoke from the incense.

—

Finally, the day of the second trial concerning the forced kidnapping and research of the Awakeners at the House of Apeto dawned. A scandal and trial involving the four major Dukedoms was an event that could be counted on one hand throughout the entire history of the Orr Empire.

In particular, the first trial, forcibly adjourned after causing a great commotion from an external incident, further ignited the interest of the imperial citizens.

Did the Apeto family really commit such a horrifying act? And were the rumors true about Duke Peletta, the leader of the Cavalry that brought them to court, harboring personal grudges and killing Lenore Shand Apeto?

The appearance of Duke Peletta at Lenore’s funeral, where he personally attested his innocence, had spurred even more interest, as it resulted in the shocking revelation that the true culprit was the Crown Prince.

The curiosity palpably emanating from the faces of those filling the grand imperial courtroom, even before the trial had officially

begun, evidenced this intense interest.

And there stood Yuder, observing this fervor with his own eyes, standing alongside the Deputy Commanders behind the high seats on the right side of the courtroom where the imperial family sat.

“All seats are filled even before the arrival of the seven judges. Such an event is rare in the thousand-year history of the empire.”

Kanna muttered, unable to hide her excitement and worry.

“I’m a bit worried about Devran and the others who should be in the waiting room. They need to testify without getting nervous.”

“It’ll be alright.”

Yuder recalled Devran’s face from a few days ago, blazing with the determination to land a punch on Apeto, and responded.

“He seemed more energetic due to the abrupt interruption during the first trial.”

“That’s a relief then.”

“Aren’t you two nervous?”

Suls Deputy Commander Steiber, standing next to Kanna, interjected, tapping his cheek with tense expressions.

“I, even though I’ve lived in the capital, it’s my first time here, so I’m really nervous. Even more than during the party. Look at Ever, she hasn’t said a word since a while ago.”

As she said, Ever was perfectly standing in attention, looking straight ahead. Even if someone was talking right next to her, it seemed like it wouldn’t reach her ears.

“I’m certainly nervous too, but talking helps me feel better. Of course, it doesn’t seem like that’s the case for Yuder…”

Kanna, turning towards Yuder, crinkled her nose slightly and chuckled. She wouldn’t know, but Yuder wasn’t having the best time in this space either. The last time he was here, he was arrested while attempting to acquire the World Sphere in his past life. He was immediately dragged here, dismissed from his position as the Commander of the Cavalry, and imprisoned.

Nevertheless, Yuder took a moment to think of something helpful to say while looking at Steiber’s pale face.

“You have nothing to worry about if you haven’t committed a crime, Steiber.”

“Huh?”

It seemed to backfire as Steiber’s face turned even paler. Yuder quickly added another line.

“If someone looks this way, they’ll be looking at the Commander, not us. No one will pay us any mind.”

“Ah. Right. Of course. Haha. That makes sense…”

Steiber, letting out a bitter laugh, took a deep breath.

“Hoo. I mustn’t be nervous.”

“The seven judges who uphold the laws of the empire and His Highness Duke Peletta will soon enter. Everyone, please rise and show your respect.”

At that moment, a loud announcement echoed, drawing everyone’s attention toward the entrance. The grand door named ‘The Gate of Truth’ opened, and the judges dressed in black robes

marched in one by one. As they took their respective seats, finally, the figure of Kishiar, adorned in white official uniform, was revealed.

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Chapter 207

Yuder watched as Kishiar straightened his shoulders and approached with impeccable strides. His mere existence there made everything seem infinitesimally small, his tremendous presence overflowing. At the sight of his relaxed face adorned with a leisurely smile, the spectators in the stands stirred slightly.

Thats the Duke of Peletta.

His appearance really does live up to the rumors

Who would've expected him to come here himself? Duke Apeto didnt even show up Is that a sign of his confidence?

While the murmurs from the amphitheater-style stand surrounding them overhead were enough to warrant attention, Kishiar never once looked away until he reached his destination.

Upon reaching the chair, Kishiar met eyes in turn with the three Deputy Commanders who were bowing in courtesy. His gaze finally landed on Yuder, standing to his right. After receiving Yuders greeting, he whispered in a low voice, audible only to the four of them.

I hope you werent too bored waiting for me.

Not at all.

You wont have a dull moment from now on. I have diligently prepared for this, so let's watch.

He winked lightly at Yuder and took his seat. Shortly after, the seven judges introduced themselves, declared their commitment to render a fair judgment based on truth, and took their seats as well.

Yuder studied the faces of the judges, who wore solemn expressions. Despite introducing themselves as substitutes for the Emperor, not all of them necessarily acted solely according to the Emperor's will. There could be those seeking to rule in favor of Apeto, or perhaps some influenced by others' intentions.

Regardless of the judges' inclinations, it was certain that Apeto would not triumph in this trial. The leisurely smile on Kishiar, sitting at ease, assured such an outcome.

May we bring forth true glory to dispel blinding lies before the light that impartially illuminates all things. Let there be not a speck of darkness.

As per tradition, a priest dispatched from the Divine Palace began with a brief prayer towards the holy symbol.

The trial begins.

Following the proclamation, two judges who had been presiding over the case stepped forward and briefly explained the case's summary.

The well-known case regarding Revlin Shand Apeto, the third son of Apeto's entry into the Cavalry, which led Kishiar to visit the Apeto house with a few members due to the incident. The horrific truth they happened upon by chance that day, suspicions related to the corruption of the Apeto house, and their subsequent investigation and accusations led to the present situation.

"…And so, His Grace, the Duke of Peletta, under the authority as the Cavalry Commander has expressed his wish for a rightful punishment for Lenore Shand Apeto and Beltrail Shand Apeto, who perpetrated this horrific incident, their accomplices who assisted them, and the Apeto family, who knew everything and remained silent."

Although everyone knew this story and had experienced it firsthand, hearing it from a third party felt peculiar. As Yuder reflected on past events, one of the judges raised their hand, calling in the first witnesses and representatives from both sides in turn.

Well begin with the Apeto family's side.

The Apeto family, accused by the Cavalry, was granted the first opportunity to defend their stance as per tradition. Yuder shifted his gaze towards the faces of the few individuals emerging from the Apeto family's waiting room.

Today, the representative who was to speak on behalf of Duke Apeto, who was absent due to poor health, and the people who were to support their opinions, stood in place with exceedingly arrogant and insincere expressions.

Amid the curious gazes of the crowd filling the gallery, they made a declaration to speak only the truth in front of the Sun God and began to speak.

"Firstly, we want to clarify that His Grace, Duke Apeto, has no relation to this matter whatsoever."

Just as Yuder had expected, he was trying to wriggle out from the start. Yuder swallowed a cold laugh as he watched the representative talk as expected.

"It is true that a family head should be responsible for everything, but there is a stark difference between bearing responsibility and directly committing a wrongdoing. Surely, no one would argue that it is only natural for His Grace to know everything happening within the family."

Even after that, he went on to mumble lengthy and convoluted opinions. To summarize, it didn't matter what else happened; Duke Apeto had no involvement and there was no reason to implicate him.

The people who claimed to support his opinion also simply repeated similar statements.

“Apeto has never been involved in a similar incident before this one. Outside, there are a number of rumors aiming to defame Apeto in relation to this incident. Even the death of the key figure of this incident, the second son Lenore, did it not happen at too opportune a time? With the mouth to tell the truth gone, some people must be quite pleased.”

One of them didn’t hesitate to make a sly comment, glaring straight at Kishiar. Kishiar merely narrowed his eyes and smiled calmly, but his Deputy Commanders standing behind him were quite angry.

“What the hell is that bastard blabbering?”

The kind-hearted Steiber clenched his teeth and murmured curses, while Ever showed ominous signs, flexing and clenching her fists, and Kanna’s face turned red with anger.

“Can he say such things freely?”

Of course not. But no one jeered at his words. Only a low-ranking judge explained with a somewhat awkward expression that ‘the remark is out of the scope of the testimony.’

Yuder looked at the face of the speaker with a cold gaze. He had been a stranger until now, but from this moment onwards, he wouldn’t be.

‘What was his name again.’

Anyway, he said he works for the House of Apeto. Yuder made sure to remember everything about him.

Next came Beltrail Shand Apeto, the former Elder Priest from Apeto, who started this whole thing. As his name was mentioned, there was a ripple of murmurs among the crowd. Seated in his wheelchair, Yuder failed to recognize Beltrail emerging from the waiting room at first glance.

Beltrail, who looked much older and more haggard than the last time he saw him, stared blankly into space, muttering something under his breath. Despite being a criminal, he was not shackled and wore clothes made of expensive fabric, but his appearance was far from appealing, causing everyone to frown. A regular priest, pushing his chair, opened his mouth on his behalf.

“As you can see, Beltrail is not in a state to freely testify. However, when asked about the events of that day, the direction of his remarks is always consistent.”

The priest claimed that he had been taking care of Beltrail on the day when Kishiar had gone to the Apeto mansion with his Cavalry members. He had not been able to witness the incident firsthand, since he had been guarding Beltrail’s room in the mansion. However, the lack of sincerity was evident as he endlessly praised how excellent Elder Priest Beltrail was.

“Though he has been caught in a scandal this time, he is a person who has served the Temple and the Empire for a long time. He lost a beloved nephew that day and witnessed the death of priests who were like his own children. He’s been wounded at heart. I fail to see how such a man could have inflicted wounds upon others.”

Yuder thought it fortunate that the Alpha Awakeners they had rescued then had not personally heard these words. If they had, there might have been a serious uproar in the court.

“Now I will show you one last thing. Elder Priest Beltrail.”

The priest knelt and asked Beltrail, who was sitting in a wheelchair.

“…Eh… Heh… Heh…”

“Elder Priest Beltrail, what happened that day?”

“That… that day… that day…”

“Please confirm your innocence, Elder Priest Beltrail.”

“Innocent… innocent… I… am… Ahh…”

Beltrail, who had been mindlessly repeating after the priest, began to shake spasmodically, dribbling saliva and looking fearful. Suddenly, when his eyes caught Kishiar, they widened in terror. He started to thrash his arms and legs, screaming.

“Ahh! Awakener! Awakener! Monster! Monster! Monster!”

Following the direction of Beltrail’s screams, everyone turned to look at Kishiar. Kishiar watched Beltrail’s fit with disinterest, resting his chin on the back of his hand that was placed on the armrest.

“Monster!”

Beltrail was eventually led away after repeating that one word over and over. The courtroom became silent in an instant. The one who broke the silence was one of the representatives who had come from Apeto.

“While he was still alive, Lenore repeatedly argued that he did not think this matter was serious enough to warrant such severe punishment. As we all know, Beltrail’s research records have been submitted as evidence. To be honest, I believe some consideration should be given to the fact that this matter involved people who had agreed to participate in the research for money through contracts.”

“Contracts, you say? Is there evidence?”

“Of course, there is. Please forgive us for the time it took to find and bring them.”

A stack of contracts was handed over to the judge by the Apeto side.

“Elder Priest Beltrail has been wanting to study the Awakeners since they first appeared two years ago. He’s an outstanding scholar who has uncovered many facts about the Awakeners and named many of them. He paid a considerable sum of money and made research contracts with the Awakeners.”

“He’s an excellent piece of garbage.”

Yuder heard Kanna mutter next to him. His sharp nerves felt a little relaxed at her words.

After a much longer time than expected had passed, the long and verbose excuses of the Apeto family to reduce their crimes finally came to an end. Due to tradition, after a certain period of time, there was a break. A recess was declared for the time it took for one hourglass to run its course.

“There was nothing unusual after all.”

In Kishiar’s brief comment as he rose from his seat, there was no hint of a reaction to those who had tried to defame him. Yuder felt a measure of relief in the fact that no one, including the deranged Beltrail, had managed to mar Kishiar.

“Then I should also pay a visit to the waiting room. Yuder, follow me.”

“Understood.”

Leaving behind the three Deputy Commanders, Yuder followed Kishiar into a small corridor on the left. The waiting room, where the witnesses and representatives taking part in the trial were resting, was located there. As they opened the door and entered, familiar faces turned to look at them all at once.

“Commander!”

“His Excellency Duke Peletta, to come all the way here…”

“We’re, we’re sorry for the inconvenience.”

Devran and Revlin quickly stood and greeted him with bright faces, and the commoner Awakeners from Hartan and the Awakeners rescued from the Apeto family all bowed deeply at once. Among them, Yuder felt a touch of joy upon seeing Zachlis Hartan, who was standing tense next to Devran’s younger sister, acting as the representative of Hartan’s lord.

‘I didn’t expect him to be here.’

And Nathan Zuckerman emerged from among the Peletta Knights, who stood as if guarding them, at the very back of the room by the door.

“You’re here.”

“There were no issues, I presume.”

“Yes. There were a couple of attempts to enter, but all were blocked.”

“And below?”

Below the court, there was a temporary space for keeping prisoners who were needed for the trial but needed to be confined to

a jail. Recognizing the question that hinted at that place, Nathan promptly provided the answer his lord sought.

“The ones we captured from Hartan are all well.”

“Good. I’m looking forward to it.”

Kishiar’s lips curved upward in a smile.

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Chapter 208

Under the watchful eyes of everyone gathered in the waiting room, Yuder watched Kishiar as he turned away. A myriad of tangled emotions trailed fervently on his face.

“Our turn is coming soon.”

Kishiar, having surveyed everyone in the room, quietly opened his mouth.

“Each of us has swallowed many grievances to stand here today. The situation that will soon confront us may be frightening. However, once you are here, you are no longer a lone fighter.”

Despite the numerous people gathered, the waiting room was so quiet that not a breath could be heard. Without raising his voice, Kishiar’s words struck the deepest chords in the hearts of those assembled.

“When we leave this place, remember that I will always be behind you. Trust in me and you will not regret having come this far.”

It was a speech of sorts, albeit just a few short phrases. But those words had a surprising power to stir the heart.

Over the uneasy and anxious faces of those gathered, gradually only calmness and well-crafted emotions remained. The eyes of the poor and ordinary people, who were not used to fighting, appeared so firm that it was hard to believe. It was a sight akin to a miracle.

Even after his speech, Kishiar spent the remaining time comfortably chatting with those who approached him timidly. At Yuder’s side, someone lightly tapped his sleeve as he watched Kishiar silently.

“Yuder.”

The one who approached him was none other than Revlin Shand Apeto. Still doll-like in beauty, the vibrant-eyed boy stood with a taciturn boy at his side and a servant, quite different from before. Yuder greeted them with a silent nod.

“Revlin.”

“This is my lover, Nion. You already know, right? And this is Pip, the servant whom Lenore had entrusted with his final letter.”

Yuder was already aware that the boy accompanying Revlin was his lover, Dandenion, as he had been introduced before. But this was the first time he had seen the servant who had brought Lenore’s letter. Upon receiving Yuder’s gaze, the servant turned away, stuttering slightly, his face slightly crumpled.

“Did all three of you come to testify?”

“Yes. It’s all thanks to you and Commander. You told us that we didn’t have to come if we didn’t want to, even as of yesterday, and that helped all of us make up our minds.”

It could be dangerous. But Revlin said it was fine, a necessary act to repay a favor and a choice he had made willingly.

“But…”

As Revlin was looking up at Yuder, he murmured with a sudden smile.

“This reminds me of when we first met.”

“At the Grand Worship, right?”

Yuder recalled the moment when Revlin first sought him out at the Grand Worship during the Harvest Festival. Revlin, who was

much better now than when he had been pale-faced, pleading for help that day, looked up at him.

“If you hadn’t taken me seriously back then, Nion and I wouldn’t be here now.”

“No, I didn’t really…”

“Thank you.”

Yuder’s mouth, which was about to say that he didn’t do much, suddenly fell silent due to an unexpected onslaught.

“I just wanted to say that now.”

Yuder silently looked down at the boy. His feelings were odd. He didn’t know how to respond. As if to say he didn’t need to, Revlin lightly tapped Yuder’s arm. His smiling face looked incredibly bright.

They watched Kishiar, leaning against the wall side by side with them, converse with others. He held the hand of Devran’s aging father, asking if there was anything inconvenient about his stay, and exchanged words of joy with Zachlis Hartan, their relationship having evolved from only exchanging opinions through letters. Even those who were intimidated by his imperial family member status, once they had a few words with him, swiftly relaxed.

Revlin, observing this, smiled.

“The Commander is truly remarkable. I’ve never admired or thought anyone to be amazing before, but now I can understand what it feels like.”

“Yes.”

Could the term ‘remarkable’ truly encapsulate Kishiar La Orr? Yuder pondered briefly, letting out a soft breath. At that, Revlin

suddenly widened his eyes in surprise and blinked several times.

“Ah. Did you just smile?”

“What?”

“I think it’s the first time I’ve seen you smile.”

Had he smiled? He wasn’t sure. Yet Revlin insisted with certainty that Yuder had smiled.

“I felt when I was in the Cavalry that the Cavalry members followed and liked the Commander sincerely, but it seems even more amazing that Yuder does too. I’m sorry. You’re his assistant, so it’s natural but still”

Before Revlin, who couldn’t hide his sense of wonder, could say anything more, fortunately, a voice announced the end of the break. Yuder followed Kishiar back into the court. As soon as Kishiar took his seat, the three Deputy Commanders who had silently been guarding the chair Yuder was to sit in, urgently motioned to him with their eyes and hands, asking him to tell them what had happened inside.

It was only after Yuder reassured them that those in the waiting room were fine and there were no issues that the expressions of all three brightened simultaneously.

“It’s the turn of His Grace the Duke of Peletta and the Cavalry side to be the witnesses.”

A voice announced the new order. All who were sitting on Apeto’s side turned their gaze in unison to Kishiar and the entrance of the waiting room behind him. The first to come out following the dark corridor were Revlin Shand Apeto, Dandenion, and the former servant of Lenore.

“My goodness, the third prince of Apeto!”

“Even though he said he would sever ties with the family and leave, to come this far”

The unexpected entrance as the first turn caused a momentary uproar inside. The representatives of the Apeto family also had perplexed expressions. However, they soon composed themselves, quickly hiding their flustered faces.

‘It seems they had anticipated Revlin’s appearance.’

But they would not have expected him to be the first. In trials of the Orr Empire, the most crucial witnesses were usually placed last.

Revlin, who showed a small smile towards Kishiar and Yuder behind him, stood at the witness stand for the Cavalry side and introduced himself.

“I am Revlin Shand Apeto. I swear before God that I will not feel a shred of shame for the words I am about to utter.”

Dandenion and Pip also made the same introduction and pledge. Revlin, unflinchingly facing the numerous scrutinizing gazes directed at him, looked around and then slowly opened his mouth.

“It’s an undeniable fact that my uncle Beltrail and brother Lenore committed a wrong they should not have. They clearly knew what they were doing. It is not something that can be downsized.”

“Prince Revlin!”

“It’s a lie! As if betraying our family isn’t enough, how could you do this?”

“Duke Peletta, aren’t you ashamed? How could you bring a young prince who can’t yet discern right from wrong into this

situation!”

A sharp outcry erupted from the Apeto side. Revlin, without even glancing in their direction, held his chin up confidently.

“You claimed my brother and uncle have made a legitimate contract with the contractors for research. However, this is contrary to my understanding. Dandenion, who was placed as my guard and playmate, and Pip, who took care of my brother Lenore until the end, will testify this more clearly.”

The audience section buzzed louder once more. Revlin, who had stepped back, lightly grabbed and let go of the fingertips of his lover stepping forward. Then, he sighed deeply and glanced back. As Kishiar nodded and smiled, a faint smile also appeared on the boy’s face.

‘Of course, he must be nervous.’

It was a situation that would make anyone nervous. But Revlin did better than anyone else, displaying a demeanor befitting a noble boy who stepped forward to expose the truth. The reactions of those seated in the audience proved it.

Following him, Dandenion, who was originally an ordinary commoner boy, told the story of how he was sold to the Apeto family by his parents after his awakening, in a manner close to abduction. If Lenore had not capriciously chosen him as a playmate of Revlin after overhearing his age and birthday, his fate would have ended inside the mansion as well.

Even after that, he was imprisoned inside the mansion for angering Lenore and was only rescued when the Cavalry came to meet Revlin. At the time of his rescue, his condition was near death.

However, in today’s trial, more important than his relationship with Revlin was proving how cunningly the Apeto family lured

Awakeners and committed atrocious deeds. Hence, the boy explained his experiences as concisely as possible, as prepared beforehand.

Although he had been well fed and rested and had received care, Dandenion was still a small and skinny boy that evoked the sympathy of those watching. Of course, that was only in appearance; his abilities were outstanding enough to give Ever, who went to rescue him, a hard time. But those watching didn't know that.

Next, Lenore's servant, Pip, who had worked for the Apeto family for seven years, told his story, including the fact that he brought Lenore. His testimony was particularly focused on, as he was the servant who received a letter on Lenore's last day and delivered it to Revlin.

"Prince Lenore often spoke about his work with Lord Beltrail. He frequently became angry about the supply and demand of Awakeners despite the Apeto family's influence, which was reaching all over the empire. Because they often died…"

"You rascal, do you know where you are to be spreading such lies!"

"Please remain quiet in the court."

The judge hastily stopped the representatives of the Apeto family, who were showing their anger in front of the stammering witness.

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Chapter 209

There had been an uproar for a while, but at the conclusion of the tumult, Lenore’s servant, Pip, managed to finish what he had to say. Having served by Lenore’s side for a long time, he knew more about the entire situation than expected.

When Lenore decided to support Beltrail’s research to gain an advantage in the family succession struggle, Pip, as a servant, delivered messages between the two several times. He had also frequently escorted Awakeners brought from various places all the way to the mansion. As he narrated every detail, including dates and names of all those involved, even the representatives of the Apeto family had to grit their teeth, unable to completely deny the veracity of his claims.

As Pip rattled off the names of the fellow servants he last worked with, and further revealed that many of them had been killed for their silence or as scapegoats, the gallery was filled with shock and excitement. His daring act of exposure, to the extent that it was hard to understand what he was relying on, was so audacious that even the grand judges opened their eyes wide, shattering their stern expressions.

It was not unusual for servants in noble houses to die without apparent cause. However, it was also certain that if such events became publicly known, they deserved criticism and investigation.

It was a historic moment when the justification and dignity of the Apeto Ducal family, which had always enjoyed various privileges while bragging about their sacrifices for the Empire, was being trampled upon by a servant who was less significant than their toes.

Amidst everyone's excitement, Pip caught his breath and wiped his sweat. He looked terrified, but there was a sense of relief within him.

"Do you think it's okay for him to say so much?"

Ever whispered with concern, to which Kishiar turned his head slightly as if he heard.

"He's planning to leave the Empire with his family as soon as the trial ends today. Several of the Peletta Knights are waiting nearby to assist in that."

"Ah…"

Including the Deputy Commanders, Yuder finally understood why Pip was able to expose everything as if shaking off his burdens.

"But still! Lenore is already departed from this world. The former Elder Priest Beltrail is nearly dead, now you're saying the innocent members of their families should pay for their sins?"

A representative of the Apeto family far away stood up and burst into a passionate argument. Despite the witness's turn not being over, he pointed at Revlin, Dandenion, and Pip, arguing that their testimonies were too exaggerated.

"How can you believe just the words of a common boy and a resentful former servant and claim that the Awakeners were forcibly brought here? It makes no sense for the Apeto family to do such a bothersome thing! It is even uncertain if the Cavalry properly investigated this matter from the beginning, let alone without any valid evidence…!"

"Valid evidence, good point."

Then, for the first time, Kishiar, who had been sitting leisurely, raised his voice so everyone could hear.

“That’s why we’re here, aren’t we? If it wasn’t for someone’s impassioned rant, we would have already presented more than enough evidence. It seems like we have a representative here who doesn’t even know the rules of a trial. If he had a bit of manner, everything would have been done by now. What do you think?”

“…”

As soon as everyone recognized the implication of Kishiar’s words, which were not loud but clearly pointed, all fell silent at once. The face of the representative, mocked as someone who doesn’t even know etiquette in front of everyone, turned beet red.

“I got excited and… I rudely interrupted. I apologize.”

Taking a deep breath, he gritted his teeth and slowly took his seat. Kanna smirked faintly as she observed the representatives and witnesses of the Apeto family, taken aback. The other Deputy Commanders also seemed a bit relieved, wearing smiles on their faces.

Taking the attention in stride, Kishiar slowly rose from his seat. Standing in place of the retreating group of Revlin, he opened his mouth again to address everyone.

“The Cavalry and I have thoroughly investigated this incident upon His Majesty’s order. Based on the testimonies of the Awakeners we rescued from the Apeto House on that day, we were able to find substantial evidence after a lengthy investigation.”

“…”

“Did the Apeto House say there was no need for them to commit such a troublesome act? They themselves would know better than

anyone why they had to do so. That's an interesting statement."

The representatives of the Apeto family, who wanted to yell something at Kishiar, furrowed their brows in unison. They recognized the implied meaning in Kishiar's words.

Kishiar slowly smiled at them. His mouth opened and a statement that the Apeto family least expected flowed out.

"I, Kishiar La Orr, the Commander of the Cavalry, will call the victims from Hartan, one of the places where the Apeto family systematically kidnapped and recruited Awakeners, the acting Lord of the place, and the arrested criminals as the next witnesses. Additionally, I request the reading of part of Beltrail Shand Apeto's research records, which were submitted confidentially as they were deemed to contain too secretive information, only for the grand judges to view. That's all."

At Kishiar's words, everyone buzzed even louder. The representatives of the Apeto family froze. They had only planned to cause enough trouble to minimize the punishment of the Apeto House, not to make the issue bigger.

"What on earth is going on? Wasn't this trial supposed to only deal with the case related to the third prince Revlin?"

"That's all a ploy to drive the atmosphere. Didn't they say that there won't be much in Beltrail's records? Prince Aishes said so…!"

"Where on earth is Hartan? Hasn't the Duke of Apeto never mentioned such a region?"

"It's in the east. The east."

"The east? Isn't that the power of the Diarca family? Could they have conspired with the Duke of Peletta…?"

The representatives gathered to urgently discuss, but no one could come up with a countermeasure. Unlike the opposing side where Kishiar himself stood, they did not have the Duke of Apeto or Prince Aeshes on their side.

While they were hurriedly sending a letter to the Apeto family through a servant, many people appeared from the inside of the corridor. Their appearances were truly diverse. There were old men with weak legs, young women, young noblemen in armor, and ragged middle-aged men.

A young man with chains around his ankles, trembling in fear, and two Awakeners, both equally scared, were led by people in Peletta Knight's uniforms. The first to step forward in the chaos was Zachlis Hartan, the acting Lord of Hartan.

"My name is Zachlis Hartan. I am currently the acting Lord of Hartan and was formerly a Knight of the Silver Cross Knights."

Zachlis, with his righteous visage, gave a knightly salute, prompting whispers among some about the Silver Cross Knights. It was a well-known order in the east, and many recognized the name.

"First, I would like to discuss the dreadful crimes committed by my naive younger brother, and those who manipulated him into action."

Zachlis recounted how his younger brother, Zakail, had conspired to usurp their father's position as the lord, framing it as a fatal accident involving fire that resulted in the deaths of his father and sister. The crowd gasped as he mentioned how Devran and his family were wrongly accused and almost entirely abducted due to the incident.

As Devran, his family, and those who were rescued from the kidnap site each shared similar testimonies, the faces of the grand

judges grew increasingly grave. It was clear to everyone that the Apeto House had committed organized atrocities.

Kidnappings, human experimentation, and murder over a long period of time. Everyone gradually began to wonder what the Apeto House had hoped to achieve through all these heinous acts.

“Had I not returned to the village once again, my brother might have achieved his vile intentions. Zakail wasn’t inherently evil, but over the course of a year, someone had twisted him.”

The witnesses finished their testimonies, and a grave Zachlis turned his gaze towards the Apeto representatives.

“Do you know that many young people in the East, like Zakail, are now turning against their families in pursuit of power due to someone’s manipulations?”

“Do you mean to imply that this is related to the current case?!” an Apeto representative bristled, to which Zachlis just tilted his head with a serious expression.

“I just meant to say such incidents have been on the rise. The tension is making me say other things as well.”

“What kind of wordplay are you…!”

“While everyone involved in the kidnapping at the time died, luckily, two mercenary Awakeners and a few Awakeners survived. I brought them here at the request of Duke Peletta. Listen to what they have to say.”

Ignoring the representatives’ interjections, Zachlis finished his piece. The Peletta Knights stepped forward, leading the restrained mercenary Awakeners. They had been bound with a magic oath and spell that prevented them from using their abilities.

Humbled, barely able to raise their heads, they began to speak with a tone of deep subjugation.

“We… we did not know who our employer was serving. He was called the warden, and he occasionally communicated with the ‘main house’… Sometimes, people directly from the main house came.”

They described the Apeto warden they knew by name and appearance and those who came from the main house. The Peletta Knights who brought them forth passed on the information about the Apeto employees they had identified based on this information to the grand judges.

“We lived in fear every day. None of the Awakeners who were taken to that so-called main house ever returned alive. They claimed to give us work, but anyone could see that wasn’t the truth!”

The Awakeners rescued from Hartan cried out, trembling, their words echoed by other Awakeners who had suffered even worse at the Apeto estate.

“I still bear many scars from that time. Some died vomiting blood due to the drugs they were forced to consume, drugs that were purported to induce heat period. And you say that none of this happened?”

The representatives from the Apeto estate turned their heads in defeat, their expressions fallen, as they listened to the outraged voices of the rescued Awakeners. Any claims of the stories being lies weakened and finally faded away.

Had the victims of the kidnapping been the only ones to come forward with their testimonies, they could have easily dismissed them as lies. But starting with the composed testimony of Revlin, a blood relative of Apeto, then through the incident in Hartan, the situation had grown so tense that it was impossible to quell it, like a dam that had burst.

The spectators were no different. Being able to sit in those seats signified that they had a certain status and power. Normally, they would look down on these individuals as mere commoners, their problems being of no concern. But the stories of Revlin Shand Apeto and Zachlis Hartan had sequentially resonated with them.

The conflict between the Apeto and Diarca houses was what truly drew their attention, but that was enough.

There was no better weapon when assessing the severity of a crime than to draw sympathy from those around. Yuder recalled the crowds at the public execution site, cheering and throwing flowers without judging whether the crime was real or not, and then brushed it aside.

As the heated atmosphere resembled that of his memory, the judge once again stepped forward.

“The testimonies are now concluded. Next, we will decide whether to accept the reading of the confidential evidence that Duke of Peletta had requested. The seven grand judges will take a brief moment to share their opinions. We will take a short break. This time, no one is allowed to leave their seats.”

“What did he just say?!”

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Chapter 210

“What did you say!”

The representatives of House Apeto cried out, but the judge’s declaration that no one could leave was firm.

“It’s to protect all those gathered here and prevent any involved parties from fleeing. Please wait a moment.”

“So you’re implying that we would run away from here! How rude.”

“What family are you from? If you dare to disregard Apeto to this extent, surely”

‘They have a notable ability to interpret everything in their favor.’

Yuder, watching these scenes play out like a farce, turned his head toward Kishiar. He was observing the seven grand judges who were locked in conversation. As it happened, it seemed the evidence they’d requested had arrived, as lower-ranking judges rushed in with paper bundles tied with string.

Not long afterward, one of the judges approached Kishiar and politely bowed his head.

“The seven grand judges have sent this to ask for His Grace Duke Peletta’s opinion on the matter of reading the confidential evidence.”

In his hand was a rolled-up piece of paper and a pen.

“I’ll check it first.”

Yuder stepped forward to receive them, making sure there were no problems in anticipation of any unforeseen circumstances.

‘There’s no issue, the content they want to know which part of the submitted evidence we wish to designate for reading.’

Having confirmed, he passed the paper to Kishiar. He quickly read the content and briefly wrote his response at the bottom. The judge took the reply and immediately returned to the seven grand judges.

“Do you have any idea which part I designated?”

Kishiar opened his mouth leisurely. Yuder blinked a few times before replying softly.

“I didn’t read the entire record, so I can’t be sure but since House Apeto has requested this to clarify why they’ve committed such acts, shouldn’t it relate to that?”

“Correct.”

A soft smile spread across Kishiar’s face as he leaned back in his chair.

“I tried to gloss over and skip the sad history of House Apeto for the sake of Prince Aishes, but if they insist on this, what can I do?”

They have no choice but to reveal the truth to defend themselves. With that remark, Yuder instantly had an inkling of which part Kishiar had requested.

‘It must be the part related to the Blood of Blessing.’

How would House Apeto react when the sins they had long hidden came to light? They probably wouldn’t be able to keep posturing so boldly.

Even the mere thought brought a sense of satisfaction, but Yuder was slightly curious if the seven grand judges would indeed permit the reading of such a secretive part in front of everyone.

“But if it’s that part, might not the seven grand judges refuse to accept it?”

“The reason there are seven grand judges is to decide the verdict by majority vote. It’s the same in this case.”

Kishiar lightly gestured toward the seven grand judges with the hand resting on his knee.

“As long as four or more agree, it can be read. Two of them took bribes from Apeto this time, and two others, though not bribed, have deep connections with other ducal houses. And the remaining three were personally appointed by His Majesty the Emperor right after his enthronement.”

“So then”

A majority of four out of seven was necessary, but if the Emperor’s faction only contained three, how could the remaining one be fulfilled? It was an unfair selection process, even if it wasn’t a quality trial. Seeing Yuder’s furrowed brow, a slightly colder smile than usual played on Kishiar’s lips.

“Yesterday, the Duke of Diarca sent a secret letter to His Majesty the Emperor. He said he would like to help, in some small way, with this matter.”

“Help? Are you implying that among the grand judges from the ducal houses faction, there is one with connections to the House of Diarca?”

“There has to be.”

Kishiar’s crimson eyes scanned the faces of the grand judges.

“Their influence reaches everywhere in this country.”

The Duke of Diarca wouldn’t have reached out without a reason. Yuder speculated on the meaning behind Kishiar’s brooding expression.

‘Is the Duke of Diarca trying to cover up the crime committed by the Crown Prince in exchange for his help in this trial?’

It was indeed wicked. It was a proposal that would have been impossible if he had not previously understood the tendencies of the grand judges.

“Did His Majesty accept his offer?”

“No.”

Kishiar curtly responded and continued.

“But they won’t care about our refusal.”

Of course, they wouldn’t. Even if their help was rejected, they could boast about their offer once it was given. Kishiar turned his gaze towards Yuder, lost in thought. He was now smiling, a playful one unlike before.

“Truthfully, it wouldn’t matter even if they didn’t help. One of the two judges linked to the Apeto family had accepted money from Prince Aishes.”

‘…Aishes Shand Apeto?’

His frantic thoughts stalled for a moment. Yuder silently performed calculations in his head.

‘Wait. Three of the seven grand judges belong to the Emperor’s faction, at least one person is from the Diarca family, and one person is from Prince Aishes’ side. That means……’

Four votes, easily enough to win by majority rule.

‘Had he anticipated this and held back until the Apeto faction had no choice but to reveal the evidence in a decisive argument?’

Indeed, it was Kishiar. There was no match for his method of obtaining his goals through acting and patience. Yuder let out a small breath and calmly smiled.

“You took great care to prevent any relevant issues from arising, Commander. Even if permission to read is granted, Prince Aishes will likely understand.”

“I hope so.”

Kishiar extended his hand, feigning regret. The Commander and his assistant locked eyes, their faces full of complicity. Eventually, the grand judges, who had been discussing amongst themselves, seemed to reach a conclusion and returned to their seats.

“As a result of our discussion, six out of seven grand judges agree to the request of His Highness, Duke Peletta. The designated section will be read by the judge shortly.”

“That’s preposterous!”

“Six votes? How could such an absurd…!”

Although shocked voices arose from the Apeto side, the judge stepped forward undeterred. He raised the document in front of the excited and curious spectators and began to read the written words.

“…Lately, I feel my illness is deepening. It has been like this since I was born, but now I truly do not know how much longer I can live. The incurable disease that doesn’t respond to any medicine or divine power, and can’t be cured by magic, has long proven our Apeto’s glorious and sad history.”

The section he had read was part of a record that Beltrail had written in diary format. While not directly mentioning the Blood of Blessing by Apeto, he knew that the nobles in the capital were well aware that many frail individuals had been born generation after generation in the house of Duke Apeto.

In the midst of everyone holding their breath, a representative from the Apeto side hastily ran out to stop him.

“You can’t! Apeto did not agree to this! Can’t you stop at once!”

“What is this nonsense in a sacred courtroom! Take him out.”

“No way!”

Despite the Apeto representative struggling and shouting, he was unable to overpower the soldiers holding him.

Taking advantage of this, the judge read the remaining part.

“Anything to survive, even if it means becoming a devil. I want answers, regardless of the sacrifices, since we are born to survive. The First Prince said that no answers can be found with the power of the Awakeners, but the Second Prince trusted me. Together we will definitely see the end of this research… That’s it.”

“…”

Everyone was speechless, except for the Apeto representative shouting in protest.

“…So that’s why.”

Someone sitting in the gallery muttered in a stunned voice. He was not the only one with such thoughts.

As if woken up from a dream, the people started stirring all at once, and not just the detained representative of the Apeto family; other representatives also rushed out to protest. Echoing around was the Apeto side’s refusal to agree to the disclosure of this information, and allegations that it was an outright lie.

Yuder turned his eyes to the oldest man who was banging on the desk in front of him with a husky voice.

“Regardless, it’s already not an issue for the Second Prince and Elder Priest Beltrail! Duke Apeto has nothing to do with it! Don’t drag him into this disgraceful affair!”

“No involvement. Really?”

Once again, when Kishiar opened his mouth, the angry glances of the Apeto family’s representatives turned back to him.

“Even if the late Second Prince Lenore helped Beltrail, do you think all of this could have been possible without the tacit approval and help of the Duke?”

“Don’t speak without evidence!”

“Evidence. I will, of course, present it.”

“What? What are you…”

Whether they were speechless or not, Kishiar did not rise from his seat but instead smiled. As he raised his hand, Nathan Zuckerman, who had been standing silently beside the witnesses, approached and pulled out a piece of paper from his bosom.

“This is a document with the personal seal of Duke Apeto, intended to support the terrible research of Beltrail Shand Apeto.”

For a moment, Yuder heard a roar that seemed to shake the entire imperial court.

“We didn’t hear such a thing! It’s a lie! It’s a lie!”

“It’s a manipulation by Duke Peletta! It’s definitely a fake!”

“Whether it’s fake or not, you’ll know when you see it.”

Kishiar elegantly twisted his hand and extended the paper toward the grand judges.

“I will submit the final piece of evidence.”

‘It’s over.’

Yuder, watching the Apeto representatives in chaos and despair, and the murmuring crowd, had a feeling that everything was over.

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Chapter 211

The trial between the Cavalry, including Duke Peletta and the Apeto Ducal House ended in defeat for the Apeto, just as many had predicted. However, the resulting storm that it stirred was beyond anyone's expectations.

The Apeto House, having braced for merely a blow to their pride if they were to lose, was slapped with an astronomical fine and the confiscation of about one-third of their official assets. Dozens of involved parties were sentenced to exile or imprisonment, having been judged guilty. Even those who were seen as indirect accomplices received relatively light punishments, their numbers reaching nearly hundreds.

The Duke of Apeto naturally resisted these penalties, but the onslaught from Emperor Keilusa and Kishiar was as if they had anticipated every possible move. As the Duke hesitated, unsure whether he should swallow his pride and seek help from other ducal houses, those siding with the Emperor engaged in 'conversation' with those members and followers of the House of Apeto.

Thanks to a fiery temperament that ran in their family, there were few in the Apeto House who possessed deep loyalty to begin with. Those who followed out of a lust for money or fear, willingly accepted the offer to lighten their own charges in exchange for testifying against the crimes of the Apeto.

While one traitor could be easily dealt with, it became impossible to handle when dozens, then hundreds began to speak out. Thus, the massive limbs of the Apeto House were swiftly severed, one by one, starting from the edges.

By the time the Duke of Apeto came to his senses, everything was already over. On the surface, it seemed like the Duke and the key members of his family had escaped punishment, but they were no more than a torso left without limbs.

Furthermore, the situation worsened when evidence emerged showing that the Duke, who had been consistently asserting his innocence, had in fact been supporting Beltrail directly. The Duke's escape from punishment, despite being responsible for his house, attracted a torrent of criticism and resentment. The numerous rumors related to Beltrail's record exposed during the initial trial also humiliated the Apeto House. It was unbearable for those who held reputation, honor, and lineage above all else.

Another incident occurred amid such circumstances. An assassin infiltrated the Crown Prince's palace, which had been quiet for some time, leaving behind a suspicion that the true killer of Lenore Shand Apeto had been found. Fortunately, the Crown Prince was unharmed, but was wounded by a poison-coated dagger and was advised to rest for some time.

The assassin committed suicide immediately upon being captured, leaving no clue as to who had hired him. However, the flower symbol engraved on a badge in his possession, presumably intended to be left behind had the mission succeeded, became the topic of discussion among the populace.

The name of the flower was Dulacrule, a symbol of sorrow traditionally placed on a child's grave by grieving parents in the empire.

Duke Apeto claimed he did not order the act, but no one believed him. Duke Diarca, despite his nickname of the 'Old Raccoon', sent a formal letter of protest to Duke Apeto, in an anger that seemed uncharacteristic of him.

Whether this was the cause was unclear, but soon after, Duke Apeto collapsed, stricken by a disease he thought he had overcome in his youth. Unable to perform his duties as the pillar of the family, all his powers were transferred to his only remaining successor, the First Prince Aishes.

Aishes, having grasped the power he had long desired, promptly embarked on a ruthless campaign to rid his faction of those who had rebelled against his father. Those who had maliciously predicted his weak constitution would render him incapable of leading the House began to fall one by one, largely due to the disgrace they had brought upon the family in such a short span of time.

Most people who were unaware of the full situation praised the fact that Aishes, the sole heir who had faithfully retained his position throughout the family's scandals, had assumed the leadership of the House, stating it was indeed a fortunate event.

All the while, Yuder Aile watched the unfolding changes from a step behind, his keen gaze concealed as he silently observed.

—

Yuder climbed to the fifth floor and knocked on the Commander's office door. Shortly thereafter, the door opened, revealing Nathan Zuckerman's face. The tall man with blonde hair who was usually present was nowhere to be seen inside the office.

With a practiced hand, Yuder picked up the pile of letters strewn across the desk and spoke.

"Has the Commander not risen yet today?"

"Yes."

In the short period when the world was rapidly changing without a moment's rest, Kishiar also reached the 'cycle' as he had previously

predicted. He was often actively leading and encouraging those involved until the trial of the Apeto family was nearly concluded. However, for the past few days, he was rarely seen outside.

‘Back then, he would at least be up early in the office…’

Today marked the third day since it became increasingly hard to catch a glimpse of him, even in his office.

‘I wonder if he’s still here.’

What does it feel like to forcibly expel the overflowing energy within your body? Despite hearing about it, he couldn’t easily imagine it because he had never experienced it himself. Kishiar hadn’t sought out Yuder, so he had refrained from speaking, but at this point, he was slightly worried.

The once busy office, always filled with a man who seemed to be constantly working, now appeared deceptively vacant, with only the ever-burning stove serving as a steady source of light. After a fleeting glance at the divine sword Orr, placed on the stove, Yuder sat down at a small desk near the Commander’s table and began his work. Ever since the festival period and the business holiday due to the manifestation had ended, he had been fully committed to the task of sorting letters.

Reading all the letters that had arrived for Kishiar, categorizing them, and picking out the most urgent ones was not a difficult task, but it was rather time-consuming.

‘Most of them are invitations today…’

However, thanks to the enhanced reputation of the Cavalry, there had been no rude requests since the festival to send an Awakener to be used as a clown, or to arrange a meeting with a young and beautiful Awakener for some pointless purpose.

Yuder quickly went through all the letters, setting aside those that were not party invitations or unilateral love letters to Kishiar. This alone reduced the pile by about eighty percent.

Just as he was about to start reading the remaining letters in earnest, Nathan Zuckerman, who had disappeared into the office earlier, returned with a cup of tea and set it beside him. Accompanying the tea was a mountainous assortment of chocolates.

“Please, help yourself.”

“…”

Yuder lifted his gaze from the mountain of chocolate, focusing on Nathan. Nathan had provided him with five slices of cake just yesterday, and the day before, he presented cookies of various hues smeared with jam. No matter how many times Yuder told him that it was unnecessary, Nathan’s terse reply was always, “I’m just following orders.”

“Did the Commander order you to give me these, too?”

“Yes.”

Seeing Nathan’s commitment to following orders daily, Yuder could only find the situation peculiar. It was as if he was going through this routine for the first time, and he wasn’t sure whether it seemed normal to Kishiar as well.

Yuder glanced at Nathan, wondering if he had anything else to say about Kishiar, but Nathan’s expression was as impassive as ever.

“Please wait a moment.”

Eventually, Yuder called out to Nathan just before he turned and disappeared.

“It seems too much for me to eat alone. Would you care to join me?”

“I thought the quantity was just enough for you to finish”

Nathan’s gaze drifted toward the pile of chocolates. Yuder recalled the dessert plates that Nathan had silently emptied in the past, and after a moment of silence, he spoke again.

“…There’s something I’d like to ask.”

“Understood.”

Finally, Nathan took a seat across from him. He didn’t touch the tea or chocolate, instead maintaining a knightly posture and gazing at Yuder.

“Do you have any questions?”

“When Kishiar’s cycle was approaching, and I asked if there was anything else I needed to be mindful of, you told me there was nothing to worry about.”

That conversation occurred when Yuder was restarting his duty of sorting through the correspondence. Nathan had said that it was a routine that was already familiar to Kishiar and him, and that there was no need for others to be overly cautious.

“Yes.”

“So, is this also normal?”

“If you’re referring to being excessively sleepy and distancing yourself from others… Yes. It’s quite common.”

Becoming excessively sleepy and distancing oneself. Yuder digested this piece of information and nodded.

“I see. Understood.”

If it was something that had already occurred in the past, then there was no need to worry excessively. Yuder realized this was just the first time in this lifetime he was experiencing such a situation. In his past life, he had grown accustomed to Kishiar disappearing for days at a time without a trace.

Kishiar had already explained and warned him about the impending cycle. Not just to Yuder, but everyone around him. If everyone was being distanced, there was no particular need to worry.

Just as he was lost in his thoughts, Nathan unexpectedly asked a question.

“…Are you worried?”

“Of course, I am worried. I have heard about it, but this is my first time experiencing it.”

If something were to happen to Kishiar, it would also impact the new future chosen by Yuder Aile. Kishiar’s existence itself was synonymous with the future.

Upon hearing Yuder’s reply, Nathan’s lips pressed together firmly.

“That’s surprising.”

It was a while before Yuder turned his head towards Nathan, who had finally spoken. Nathan was looking at Yuder, his eyes a mix of curiosity and some inexplicable emotion.

“Did you think I wasn’t worried about the Commander at all?”

“To be honest It seemed that way.”

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Chapter 212

To express vague worries would only invite danger in return. There was no need to make a fuss every day just because one was worried. Yuder had merely been waiting in silence, but it seemed that his demeanor appeared extremely calm to others. He recalled a particularly serene expression on his face and absently stroked his chin.

“When I heard the Commander’s words, I assumed that this cycle would end quickly. But isn’t it lasting far longer than expected?”

“Indeed, it is lasting quite long this time.”

Nathan Zuckerman nodded in agreement.

“Yet it still hasn’t surpassed the longest duration.”

“What was the longest period?”

“One month. It was two years ago.”

Two years ago. Around the same time that Kishiar had awakened. Yuder could not even begin to imagine Kishiar of that era, who he only knew from stories, and who he could never truly know. Giving up on this fruitless effort, Yuder raised his head. Nathan Zuckerman was still sitting upright, looking straight ahead.

“Does the cycle lengthen when his physical condition is poor?”

“No. Rather than that”

Nathan Zuckerman’s words trailed off, and his eyes darkened.

“It is known to lengthen when the power does not dissipate properly.”

“Dissipation, you mean”

Yuder recalled the small potion Kishiar had shown him.

“Isn’t that why he drinks the potion? That’s what I heard But even after taking the potion, are there times when the dissipation is particularly good or bad?”

Nathan Zuckerman did not immediately answer. Just as Yuder was about to give up on waiting for his response, a soft, low voice resonated in the room.

“That is”

“Oh, you’re already here.”

At that moment, the aura in the inner hallway surged, and Kishiar appeared. The man, who usually kept his aura well suppressed, was releasing it so much today that it could be felt from afar. He was, as always, dressed in a white uniform. Yuder was captivated by Kishiar’s beautiful face, which looked freshly washed and still damp. His appearance was already eye-catching, but today the combination of dampness and languor made him even more devastating.

“You’re here.”

Nathan Zuckerman promptly rose from his seat and bowed. After Yuder also stood and greeted him, Kishiar’s gaze moved towards the desk. He scanned over the classified pile of letters, the pile of chocolates on the tray, and the single cup of tea, before his red eyes returned to Yuder.

“Were you two chatting?”

“Sir Aile had a question, so we were briefly engaged in conversation.”

“It seems you’ve become quite friendly in my absence. I feel a bit jealous, Nathan.”

””

Where in this cold silence could there be jealousy? Yuder read from Nathan Zuckerman’s silence that he shared the same thought.

“Was there anything urgent to confirm while I was asleep?”

“Nothing urgent. The sequential tasks are over there for your review.”

As Kishiar’s adjutant, Nathan Zuckerman primarily handled the communications related to Kishiar’s territory of Peletta, but that was not all. Besides managing Peletta’s Knights, he received all sorts of secret communications through various channels when Kishiar was absent. Seeing how he managed to handle such a volume of work while also attending to Kishiar, Yuder couldn’t help but admire him.

He might have done something else as well…

Kishiar, who slowly approached the desk, skimmed through the piles of paper laid upon it. As he unrolled the scroll on top, he suddenly froze his fingertips.

“Beltrail Shand Apeto is critically ill.”

“Wasn’t he imprisoned in the Regien Tower?”

“It seems someone poisoned his food. It’s unlikely he’ll survive today - perhaps he’s already departed for the long journey.”

While countless individuals paid their penalties from the House of Apeto, Beltrail, naturally the greatest sinner of them all, also faced

his judgment. He was stripped of his entire fortune and sentenced to 15 years in prison, leading him to Regien Tower, where most noble criminals were incarcerated.

In reality, the grand judges aligned with the Emperor argued that he should be imprisoned in the most remote land at the edge of the empire. However, the opinion of the House of Apeto that the punishment was too severe for someone of unstable mind was accepted, and instead, an agreement was reached with the confiscation of his property. He was to be sent to the Regien Tower within the capital.

The result of his punishment became the significant standard to conclude all the matters surrounding the House of Apeto. It was a victory for the Emperor and Kishiar, publicized far and wide.

Kishiar did not personally attend it, but Yuder saw with his own eyes how the people of Hartan who returned after witnessing the verdict, the Awakeners who had suffered, and Devran rejoiced. He recalled their faces when they finally returned to their homeland after Beltrail's trial, as if they were finally free from their pent-up resentment and anger.

If those who had left quietly in the middle of the night, so as not to bother Kishiar any further, heard this news, what would they think?

Without a doubt, it was a job well done. However, Yuder had to think about what was next. He moved to Kishiar's side and opened his mouth.

"Has it been determined who did it?"

"Of course, there's no evidence. But circumstantially, it's probably Aishes Shand Apeto."

Aishes. If he, who now took control of the family, had wished to eliminate Beltrail, it was completely possible. After all, having him

alive wouldn’t bring any benefit to the future of the House of Apeto.

“So the first son has officially made his move.”

“Yes. The Duke of Apeto is trying to defend, but the Duke still hasn’t woken up. It’ll be tough for a while. I’m curious about who will win.”

Kishiar, who said this, looked much better than he had yesterday. There was no comparison since yesterday Yuder had only seen him when he had finished his work.

Yuder looked at his face and naturally responded.

“Whichever of the two wins, there should be no harm to you, Commander.”

“I’m trying to make sure that’s the case.”

“And so it will be.”

Regardless of who won, the future of Duke Apeto was dark, and Aishes wouldn’t be able to beat his frail body.

Kishiar chuckled lightly.

“Your assurance is as strong as if you’ve seen the future.”

Yuder paused for a moment but quickly regained his composure.

“Well… my prediction is that the first son will win in the end. Once he takes over the Duke’s position, we’ll have to wait and see what happens next.”

As he muttered, Kishiar slumped into his chair and let out a long breath.

“Nathan, could you make me a cup of tea?”

“Of course. Is there anything else you need?”

Kishiar shook his head.

“Just wait a moment, please.”

Nathan Zuckerman, who had nodded to Yuder, left the Commander’s office. Kishiar beckoned Yuder closer with a gesture of his hand.

“How have things been lately? It’s been hard to check in since I haven’t been able to get out.”

“Everyone is training diligently. Their morale has risen since the trial of the House of Apeto…”

At Yuder’s response, Kishiar suddenly wore an odd expression. Yuder stopped mid-sentence and blinked.

“…Wasn’t that what you asked about?”

“No. I was curious about that too. But what I asked about…”

Kishiar trailed off, chuckling weakly as if he found his own question amusing. His red eyes softened.

“…was about you.”

Something in Yuder’s chest felt tight. He could feel the atmosphere subtly shift.

Unintentionally, his gaze fell to Kishiar’s lips before dropping away. Looking at his smile was, for some reason, difficult.

“I am, of course, well. You saw me yesterday, didn’t you?”

“That was brief.”

“…”

“Very brief.”

Nothing had changed since they had admitted their attraction and shared a kiss. Despite the trials they had faced, including the first conflict with the House of Apeto and Kishiar’s constant struggles with his own body, Kishiar’s attitude towards Yuder had remained unchanged. The only shift was a subtle change in how he addressed him.

Whenever their faces brushed past each other in passing or they locked eyes during conversations about work, the intensity of his gaze was warm yet fierce. It was incredibly difficult to ignore such a powerful pull, strong enough to make one forget the presence of others.

Time and space seemed to melt away in his presence. It had been like this before, but now it was even more intense. Once Yuder looked at him, it was impossible to look away. That precarious feeling was subtly knocking at the back of his mind now.

“Is your work for today done?”

“No, I’ve just finished sorting.”

“That’s good.”

Not understanding what he meant by ‘good’, Yuder looked at Kishiar who was smiling at him.

“Then you can stay here a bit longer.”

“…Do you want me to stay here longer?”

“If possible.”

His answer was light, almost joking, but it could have been serious. Yuder hesitated, unsure of how to respond, before cautiously opening his mouth.

“I will try.”

“How?”

His languid voice asked, seemingly teasing.

“Why don’t you give me more tasks to do here, Commander?”

Yuder thought this was a pretty good response. However, Kishiar’s red eyes, holding a deeper heat than usual, seemed to disagree. He soon tilted his head and spoke, a smile playing on his lips.

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“Yuder, I hear you’ve been training at dawn with Ever Beck lately.”

“Yes?”

“Did you start with a particular goal in mind? If so, is it going well?”

“Ah… yes.”

Taken aback by the sudden change in topic, Yuder nodded. These days, as he’d asked, he was training with Ever every morning. Although they called it ‘training’, it was essentially observing the flow of Ever’s power as she exercised it, and it turned out to be more interesting than expected.

Ever was clumsier than her previous life that Yuder knew of, but her power control was undeniably more delicate compared to other Awakeners. Yuder’s current goal was to learn that technique and apply it to himself.

However, he hadn’t expected Kishiar to bring up the topic abruptly, and it took him a while to understand the implication and respond.

“Ever is currently the most proficient among us in controlling small units of power. I am getting her help as I am somewhat clumsy in that area.”

“Thais Yulman and his apprentice are continually assisting you as well.”

Kishiar changed the topic again.

After the underground lab incident, Thais Yulman had moved his research lab at the order of Kishiar. His new lab was a warehouse building within the Imperial Knight, a short distance from the Cavalry. Despite the fatigue from moving his belongings over several days, he seemed even more ecstatic than ever, tirelessly planning his future research.

His apprentice, Alik, was training his awakened water control abilities while assisting his master. Every time Yuder visited, Alik would fervently bombard him with questions, leading to hours-long conversations if he got a hold of him.

In truth, the total amount of water Alik could summon was barely enough to fill a cup, so it couldn't be deemed powerful. However, his development speed surpassed any other member, perhaps due to his experience of watching mages wielding elemental magic over his shoulder. Because of this, Yuder had high expectations for him.

Combining all that, Yuder responded in a word, "Yes, it's my duty."

"Aren't you also frequenting the medical division, monitoring the training of the Deputy Commanders, and investigating the two Awakeners who belong to the Star of Nagran?"

"…Yes."

'Why would he ask how I've been when he seems to know more about my routine than I do?'

Kishiar laughed a bit more deeply at Yuder's awkward response that seemed to contain that question.

"And yet, you're asking for more tasks. Are you serious?"

"I wouldn't mind having even more tasks than now."

“A typical answer from Yuder Aile. But I didn’t bring this up to watch you suffer from overworking.”

Suddenly, Yuder felt a formless energy drawing his body. He slightly turned his head. Although it was invisible to the eye, an energy that had filled the Commander’s office was now fluctuating in the air.

‘This is…’

It was Kishiar’s energy. He could tell right away. The unrestrained energies, in sync with their master’s will, freely fluctuated in a rather fierce manner, circling around Yuder. Yuder watched Kishiar while trying not to be distracted by that energy.

“But isn’t that the best way?”

“There is a simpler alternative.”

What else could keep him longer in the Commander’s office besides work? As Yuder frowned slightly, Kishiar whispered in a voice so sweet that it made his heart flutter.

“When you wish to stay, stay for as long as you like.”

“…”

“What do you think?”

Even if he tried to consider it casually, he could immediately understand that the implied meaning was far from ordinary. Seeing the face tinted with the blatant color of desire, seemingly expecting a response, thirst reflexively sprang forth within Yuder. His mouth began to dry, but he swallowed hard, struggling to suppress that heat.

“…I will keep that in mind.”

“Just keep it in mind?”

The precarious atmosphere felt more potent today, probably because of the unrestrained aura that Kishiar exuded. Reason warned him not to be swept away by such a formidable force.

“I will also make an effort.”

“Well, you won’t be swayed easily.”

Kishiar smiled slightly, a twinkle in his eyes. Not knowing why he found it amusing, Kishiar laughed softly for a while before leaning back in his chair, exhaling deeply.

A few moments later, only a deep gaze remained in the place where the laughter had faded, and silence followed. Kishiar, staring as if piercing Yuder’s innermost thoughts with his red eyes, opened his mouth.

“Were you not upset that I haven’t been around much?”

Yuder suddenly wondered if this was what Kishiar had wanted to ask him all along. He couldn’t be sure, but it felt like that.

“I was fine… but.”

As he continued, Yuder noticed the peculiar look in Kishiar’s eyes and quickly changed his words.

“When I heard from Sir Zuckerman earlier, he mentioned that your cycle has been longer this time. I was quite worried about that.”

“So that’s what you were discussing with Nathan.”

Finally, it seemed that the mystery was resolved. Kishiar nodded slowly.

“There’s no need to worry. This cycle being longer is simply because I’ve been trying to release my energy in the most natural way, doing nothing in particular. Despite how Nathan may seem, he worries a lot, and sometimes sees situations too negatively.”

So the lengthening of his cycle was due to a natural release of energy, did that mean he had been expelling it in some other way before? The phrasing was odd, but it would be strange to probe further. After hesitating for a moment, Yuder asked briefly.

“But are you okay?”

“I have to make sure I am.”

There was a glimmer of heat in Kishiar’s gentle gaze.

“Having discovered the truth, I don’t want to cover my eyes with other things and live in vain.”

He didn’t understand what that meant, but for some reason, seeing Kishiar so exhilarated made him feel alright. His skin prickled where the gaze full of warmth landed.

Yuder swallowed, as if shaking off the sensation that seemed to crawl up his spine.

“Understood… If there’s anything I can do to help, please let me know.”

“I want to touch.”

The sudden remark changed the atmosphere again. As Yuders mouth fell open as if he was about to question, what?, Kishiar repeated his statement.

“I really want to touch.”

“What do you mean?”

Yuder questioned, but he already knew the answer. His gaze was fixed on his face; he couldn’t feign ignorance even if he wanted to. A moment later, as if to ask whether he really didn’t understand, Kishiar raised his hand slightly, a secret smile creeping up the corners of his mouth, and his premonition turned into a complete certainty.

Why such pointless acts

He found himself unable to tear his eyes away, as if the spectacle before him was verging on the obscene. How he wished he could brush it off and flee as easily as in the past, when he saw the man as nothing more than a pesky serpent. But those days were long gone.

“…Where would you like it to be?”

“Are you really going to let me touch you?”

A heavy murmur broke the silence, yielding an unexpected reaction, as though the proposition had never been anticipated.

“As long as it doesn’t cross any inappropriate boundaries, it should be fine.”

“Inappropriate, huh?”

Kishiar shot a question back at Yuder, who was gently nodding, as if to confirm the boundaries.

“Can I… touch your hair?”

“Yes.”

“And your hand?”

“Yes.”

“Can I touch your cheek as well? What about your ear?”

“…Yes.”

It felt ridiculous to check each point, but Yuder answered nonetheless.

“Hmm. How about, here?”

Kishiar lightly tapped the area below his own lips with his index finger, a playful smile in his eyes.

“…Are you sorry, or were you planning on mocking me from the start?”

“Ha-ha-ha.”

Chilled by the reply, Kishiar suddenly hid half his face, bursting into a gleeful laughter. Yuder, about to retort, instead stood stupefied, staring blankly at his face.

Perhaps a flower blooming and melting under the warm sunlight was akin to this moment.

Despite having seen Kishiar La Orr’s smiling face countless times before, Yuder realized he had never witnessed such an expression. The recognition surfaced fleetingly in his mind before quickly dissipating. The laugh of a man he thought he knew so well seemed foreign, something never seen before, and it pierced deep into Yuder’s heart.

“I’m sorry. I do want to touch you, but I can’t right now.”

I’m afraid once I touch you, I won’t be able to stop.

His bittersweet muttering, tainted with laughter, echoed in Yuder’s ears. It was only after these words settled did Yuder manage to blink and return to his senses.

“It’s such a shame, given you had even given permission.”

“…”

“Your Grace, your tea is ready……”

Yuder, who should have responded but couldn’t muster a thought, was fortunate that Nathan Zuckerman returned at just the right moment. Seeing the remnants of Kishiar’s laughter on his face, Nathan paused momentarily, then glanced briefly at Yuder.

“Did something happen?”

“Just a very cute incident. Want to know?”

Despite Kishiar’s jesting remark, Nathan showed no reaction. Having dealt with Kishiar’s teasing numerous times before, Nathan placed the teapot and cups on the table with an unchanging stoic expression. This allowed Yuder to regain his composure.

“I’ll finish the rest of my tasks, then.”

“Do so.”

Kishiar waved a hand in dismissal, still smiling. Yuder quickly returned to his seat, pulling the letters he had sorted towards him. His intention was to read them all as quickly as possible and leave, but the gaze on the side of his face was quite unnerving.

‘This is a letter from the Imperial Mages. This one looks like it’s about the costs incurred from summoning those people for the trial… and this one too. And this is…?’

His gaze, moving at top speed to decipher the words, suddenly halted at one point. Yuder frowned as he held two letters, staring at the characters written on their fronts.

‘One is from the Commander of the Imperial Knights, Theorado Van Tain. And the other from the Second Prince Ejain Afnan of

Nelarn. Both of them, request letters.’

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At a glance, both letters were far from ordinary. The unrest that Yuder had felt due to his conversation with Kishiar moments ago swiftly subsided. With a steady hand, he first unsealed the request from Theorado Van Tain.

The letter, sent ostensibly to the beloved Duke Peletta, commenced with a friendly preamble. Though it wasn't long, the content was anything but mundane as expected.

Perhaps Your Grace, Duke Peletta, has come to know about the frequent monster appearances beyond the western border of the empire lately. Despite it being much earlier than usual, multiple hordes of monsters numbering in the hundreds have been observed, and in the western surrounding nations, including Durban, several nearby cities and towns have already suffered significant damage. This distressing information has come to our attention.

'…What is this?'

Yuder silently read on, pressing his lips together.

So far, the empire has not suffered significant damage, but it is uncertain whether this will continue to be the case. We, the Tain family, who have defended the western lands of the empire for generations, are considering advancing our monster subjugation plans. If Your Grace, the Duke Peletta, who brilliantly led the Cavalry during the Harvest Festival, would consider this matter seriously and is willing to offer assistance, I request that you kindly reply to me.

The sudden surge of monsters in the west, much more than usual years, and the subjugation.

It was an all too familiar tale. Yuder looked at the letter and tried to recall his memories from his past life.

‘Right. It’s exactly like that time. But then… the timing was later than now.’

The same thing happened in his past life. However, by the time Yuder of that era learned about what was happening in the western part of the empire, the damage had already been done.

Several knight orders that headed there first suffered near-annihilation, and the empire’s forces could not properly respond. This led the once-overlooked Cavalry to be pushed toward the west. It was the Cavalry’s first official mission, which was anything but glorious.

Heading west burdened with heavy responsibility and without sufficient time to prepare, the Cavalry members somehow managed to convey news of their first glorious victory to the capital.

However, there was no time for celebration. The onslaught of monsters, which kept appearing no matter how many were slain, relentlessly continued whenever they let their guard down. Lowly sabotage and restraint aimed at the victorious Cavalry followed suit. Casualties were inevitable.

Even after Commander Kishiar personally entered the battlefield multiple times, it took more than three months to fully suppress the monsters. In the process, many of the original members were seriously injured or killed, including Gakane Bolunwald, which was highly respected within the group.

The Cavalry was greatly shaken by the incident. The voices of unrest grew louder as Kishiar, who had to stabilize the group, designated Yuder as his successor and frequently absented himself. The situation reached a peak of chaos when Emperor Keilusa also left the world around the same time. Many members who had

believed and followed the Commander either defected or fled. The remaining members could never return to their previous lives.

Looking back, it was almost a miracle that the Cavalry was not disbanded then.

‘I’ve been training the entire Cavalry so hard since I returned to prepare for this, but I didn’t expect to get the information in this way.’

Even earlier than in his previous life, it happened through a letter from Theo, a member of the Tain Ducal House and also Imperial Knight Commander.

Yuder suspiciously glanced over the part that was labeled as the Tain Ducal House.

To subjugate them in advance sounds good. Excluding the fact that I dont think highly of their reason for wanting to do something they didnt do in their previous life.

Although it was correct that since the main territory of the Tain Ducal House was in the west, it wasnt strange if they were worried about the news of monsters starting to break out from their homeland. But in his previous life, the Tain Ducal House was so reluctant to ask the Cavalry for help until monsters had encroached upon the very doorstep of their main territory.

If they really wanted to subjugate the monsters in advance, wouldn’t it be easier and more convenient to hire mercenaries, or call for a group of knights with whom their family had ties, instead of asking for help from the newly formed Cavalry?

Still, it would be easier to assume this is a trick aimed at putting pressure on the Cavalry and Kishiar’s side.

He would have ignored it if he didnt know what was going to happen in a few months, but this matter couldn’t be ignored.

Regardless of when it was going to be dealt with, the sooner, the better.

Yuder sighed, folding up the letter he had been glaring at.

No matter what they do this time, they wont get away with it as easily as before. So it doesn't matter.

But what really didnt sit well with him was that the plea for help was sent not by the Tain Duke himself, but by someone else.

Theorado Van Tain might be a member of the Tain Ducal House and Commander of the Imperial Knight, but in this matter, he was nothing more than a third party. If the Tain Ducal House and Commander Theo really sincerely wanted help, they should have at least made the effort to come directly to the Cavalry building. After all, the Imperial Knight and the Cavalry share the same premises.

The fact they didnt do so could only be interpreted as an intention to avoid stepping into the Cavalry building, including Kishiar, and even more so to avoid face-to-face interactions.

Even now, the Imperial Knights, who were under Theo, were ignoring the Cavalry members like bugs, disrespectfully passing by Kishiar without even a greeting. What more could be expected from such folks?

With a cold heart, Yuder unfolded the second letter sent by the second prince of Nelarn, Ejain. The main content was not long this time either. He first courteously explained who he was and revealed that he had stayed in the capital so far to further admire the culture of the empire, which he might not see again after the festival had ended and all other diplomats had returned home.

…The reason I am sending you this letter is straightforward. I originally planned to stay in the empire a bit longer, but due to unexpected circumstances, I will be returning to Nelarn soon.

However, due to some somewhat dizzying political situations surrounding me, I find myself in a situation where I must depart with as few people as possible.

Ejain did not detail what the dizzying political situation was. Thanks to that, Yuder had to rummage through his memories for a while before recalling the information that Ejain was often threatened with his life by his brothers due to the exceptional abilities he demonstrated during his prince days in his previous life.

I remember him becoming the king only after he had clearly sorted everything out after becoming an Awakener.

Yuder continued to read the section below.

According to our sources, the number of monsters appearing in the western borderlands has increased dramatically of late. It's quite risky to leave the imperial border with a small group and head to a safe location for many reasons. Therefore, we requested if the emperor could grant us humanitarian assistance. In response, we were given the most gracious answer that a letter should be sent to His Grace the Duke of Peletta, who is in charge of the Cavalry.

Although it was written as humanitarian assistance on the surface, its true meaning aligned with the intention of Emperor Keilusa to firmly protect Prince Ejain by leveraging Kishiar. Knowing the succession battle taking place in Ejain's motherland, Nelarn, if the Emperor made such a decision, it was highly likely that a politically understanding conversation had been established between the prince who came as an envoy and the Emperor.

'… Perhaps the reason why Prince Ejain came to the Empire as an envoy in this dangerous time was for that purpose from the beginning.'

Ultimately, as Ejain would be the ultimate winner of Nelarn's throne, Emperor Keilusa's decision would turn out to be correct.

Yuder, with a sudden realization, folded the letter thinking that Emperor Keilusa too was a man with a perspective and sense that were too valuable to die early, just like his brother Kishiar.

As if he had been waiting for that, Kishiar's voice came from beside him.

"Your expression has been unusual while reading, what are these letters about?"

"These letters, it seems that Commander should see them and reply as soon as possible today."

"Is the content that urgent?"

Instead of explaining, Yuder got up and put the letters on Kishiar's desk. A moment later, Kishiar, having read all the letters, lifted his head with an absent smile.

"Interesting. Both of the letters are discussing the same monster incidents happening in the same region."

"Did you already know, Commander?"

"If you're talking about the information that a much larger number of monsters is appearing in the western borderlands compared to last year, yes, I did know."

An unsurprising response returned.

"How did you…"

"Do you remember? Before the festival, there was a letter where some lord from the west suddenly asked for help from the Cavalry to subdue the monsters that had appeared."

"That letter… Ah."

Just as he was about to ask when such a letter had arrived, a vague memory suddenly surfaced.

‘Was it the day I first helped with the letter classification?’

The day he realized that the Cavalry’s schedule, which he thought would be neglected all along, had completely changed due to a single letter, Yuder selected two letters he thought were rather normal from numerous ones. One was a letter sent from the imperial palace, and the other was the request that Kishiar mentioned.

“Thinking it was the first proper request letter, I eagerly checked and found it to be an extremely rude request from someone who thought it would be cheaper to have an awakened slave rather than to spend money on knights.”

“…I see. I apologize.”

Kishiar, who slightly shook his head as if saying it was okay to Yuder’s apology, continued his speech with a calm face.

“Anyway, the only truth in that letter was the part about the monster appearances. But that was really strange. It’s not the season for monsters to appear within the border now. So I ordered a few of the Peletta Knights to continuously survey the surrounding situation.”

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Even amidst his busy schedule, he had consistently examined the situation in the West, all based on a tiny suspicion embedded within the rude letter. It was a skill beyond admiration, enough to send chills down his spine. Yuder blinked blankly for a moment before he managed to open his mouth.

“That’s… really impressive.”

“Impressive, what nonsense. I merely gave the orders. The loyal knights carried out the task.”

“Are you saying that Sir Aile wouldn’t believe it was real? Please clarify the whole process.”

Suddenly, Nathan Zuckerman, who had been standing near Kishiar, interjected. Kishiar’s previously laughing face subtly changed. Yuder, puzzled, turned to look at Nathan.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s true that you dispatched our Peletta Knights to verify the truth of the contents of the request letter. But after you grasped the dark intentions of the local lord there, you didn’t order an immediate return. Instead, you sent more people, not just because of the monsters that had appeared out of season”

“Oh, Nathan, that’s enough.”

Kishiar interrupted Nathan’s words. However, Yuder seemed to understand the rest of the cut-off sentence.

“Did you order them to sit there helplessly as a form of protest?”

“Something like that.”

“It wasn’t that direct, though.”

Kishiar sighed, resignedly answering.

“Monsters are often referred to as a curse of the god, aren’t they? If they really appeared at this time, it looked certain that it was the lord’s fault, so I just asked them to stay and observe. It turned out that he was indeed extremely immoral.”

“Thanks to that, the lord there is about to be anonymously reported with the evidence we collected and is scheduled to be tried in the capital. The unusual movement of the monsters compared to previous years was an incidental discovery, so we could say it was a secondary harvest.”

Nathan spoke curtly. Kishiar narrowed his eyes and smiled contentedly.

“It’s like we did some advance research.”

“Do you know how hard it was for the rest of us knights, including myself, to deal with the absence of several people chasing after that swine during this busy time?”

It was only then that Yuder understood why the usually stoic knight had responded to his lord’s words.

‘So that’s what it was.’

If they had to deal with reduced staff during the busy festival period due to an inconceivable reason, anyone would have been upset.

“You’ve ruined my chance to show off my skills in front of my respectful assistant because of you, Nathan. The momentum’s

gone.”

“Sir Aile should also know the truth, shouldn’t he?”

“If this issue causes my assistant to lose respect for me, you’ll be responsible.”

” I believe you made a reasonable choice, sir.”

At Yuder’s response, Nathan and Kishiar simultaneously turned to look at him.

“Do you mean that sincerely, Sir Aile?”

“Yes.”

“Do you mean you would have done the same?”

“Well, I’m not sure. If I had the authority to punish the fake request, I might have personally overturned their entire living area into a field.”

Compared to that, how humane and rational was it to find evidence of immorality and hand it over for trial?

Nathan Zuckerman held his silence for a moment. Kishiar, who had opened his eyes slightly wider, burst into laughter. A knight’s gaze, seeming to scrutinize Yuder’s mind, swept over his face.

“…When Sir Aile speaks like that, it doesn’t feel like a joke at all. It’s as if you’ve done it before.”

‘He’s quick-witted.’

In fact, Yuder had experienced similar events several times in his previous life. However, he could not reveal that fact and hence maintained his silence.

“Well, look. Even the assistant admitted I did well.”

Fortunately, Kishiar, with a brazen face, intervened and changed the atmosphere. Yuder stepped back and watched as Kishiar and Nathan resumed their conversation.

The admiration he felt for Kishiar, who he thought had a more impressive predictive power than he did, having seen the future, had now faded. But in its place, his thoughts lingered on the casual remark that had just been made.

‘A chance to show off my abilities in front of an assistant who admires me…’

A peculiar part of his heart felt agitated. Anyone might feel this way, but he hadn’t expected Kishiar to say such a thing. He was equally surprised by the considerably harsher than usual response to the impudent request, something he hadn’t anticipated.

To be able to see the genuine emotions of a man, who was normally difficult to comprehend, felt strangely new.

His serious mood due to letters from the Tain Ducal House and Ejain had significantly improved. Feeling lighter, Yuder waited for Kishiar’s conversation to subside before asking a question.

“So, Commander, do you intend to accept all the requests written in these letters?”

“I’ll have to talk to both, but probably so.”

Kishiar answered without hesitation.

“I’ve felt the need to send the Cavalry and tidy up the western border even without collaborating with the Tain Duchy. It’d be better if we could discreetly deal with Second Prince Nelarn along the way.”

“…”

It was perfect. Just the answer Yuder had imagined.

If Kishiar hadn’t been so worried about the monsters appearing in the western territories, his hesitation about how to persuade him would have seemed foolish.

“Are you worried about facing a terrifying monster?”

“Why would I be?”

Yuder glanced down at his gloved hand and smiled coldly.

“…I’m looking forward to it immensely.”

—

Two men stood in front of the Regien Tower, faces deeply hidden under pilgrim hats, wearing the clothes of priests who serve the sun god. Several knights solemnly stood their ground in front of the tower, protected by magic to imprison nobles with exceptional abilities.

“Good day. I am here to see Mr. Bertrail…”

As one of the priests approached the knights and began to speak, all eyes turned toward them.

“Are you the priests who have come to offer the final prayers?”

“Yes.”

“Show me proof that you have come from the temple.”

At the knight’s words, the shorter priest hastily took out a holy symbol and a scripture from his bag. His hands trembled slightly, but

the knight didn’t notice. With a solemn face, he merely nodded and gestured toward the interior.

“Please enter.”

The tower gate opened. The two priests followed the knight’s guidance, climbing the stairs to the topmost floor of the tower. The taller priest followed the knight well, but the shorter one’s pace slowed considerably after climbing a few floors.

“My apologies. May I carry my company?”

“Ah… Please do.”

The knight thought the taller of the priests had a surprisingly vigorous strength for a cleric. Only after they had walked to the point of exhaustion did they finally reach a door. It took seven turns of the magical key to unlock the rusted locks and push the door open.

Although the room was as worn as any typical noble’s quarters, it was filled with the stench of death. The ragged breath of a man, teetering on the brink of death, echoed from the bed placed beside the window. The priests approached the bedside and looked down at the man lying there.

The only prisoner trapped in this place, Bertrail Shand Apeto, lay there with his eyes half-open, his body emaciated and shriveled to the point that his former appearance was barely recognizable. His clouded, milk-white eyes flickered restlessly, reaching into the empty air as if possessed by a demon. His lips, nearly devoid of teeth, mumbled something incoherent.

Thinking the priests were stunned into silence, the knight who had led them offered consolation.

“It was said that the poison is the cause of this transformation, not possession by a demon. His mind has merely gone.”

“…I see.”

The taller of the two priests muttered under his breath.

“If the priests are worried, I’ll stay here.”

“No, we appreciate your offer, but it is tradition that no one other than family should accompany during the final prayer. If anything happens during the prayer, we will call for you, knight.”

“Very well. I’ll be outside the door. Call me immediately if you need me.”

Well, whether a man about to die would be able to hear the prayer, he can’t say for sure. With a glance of disinterest at Bertrail, the knight turned and left.

The priests stood still until they heard the door close. A few moments later, the shorter man removed his pilgrim’s hat, revealing his face before letting out a sigh.

Surprisingly, he was a young man from the South, with the distinctive deep red skin of his people.

“…Young Master. Is it really necessary to go this far? This man has already been punished. He’ll die soon without us doing anything.”

“Hosanna. If you were going to complain, you should have stayed behind.”

“But…”

“The true punishment does not end with death, you should know that.”

The taller man let out a cold laugh.

“I resolved to kill the culprit with my own hands, but I didn’t succeed then. Now it’s time to finish what I started. He must not die in peace, listening to prayers, not for the sake of our dying brothers.”

“Still, if those outside discover who we are.”

“They didn’t even notice you walking with prosthetics thanks to my abilities. Why worry now?”

The eyes of the young man called Hosanna darkened. His gaze turned to the prosthetic leg hidden beneath his priestly robes.

“I apologize for the inconvenience of carrying me.”

The taller man clicked his tongue at the crestfallen Hosanna.

“I’m tired of hearing that. If you can’t watch, turn around. It will be over soon.”

Leaving Hosanna behind, the taller man approached the front of the bed. He knelt down as if about to pray devoutly and removed his pilgrim’s hat.

“Bertrail Shand Apeto. Look at me.”

The moment the face, half-covered with a dreadful scar, was revealed, Bertrail’s eyes, previously aimlessly fluttering, widened as if torn apart.

“Are you coming to your senses after all this time?”

“Hu, hu, help, you, you’re……!”

“I am the Reaper, here to harvest your life.”

“Sa, save… there, no, no one……!”

“For our brothers, you cannot die peacefully.”

With his icy retort, the man extended a hand to grasp Bertrail's face. Despite Bertrail's desperate thrashing and screams, the noises from his throat, now on the cusp of death, were pathetically weak.

"Ahh, no…!"

Moments later, a dim light flowed from the man's hand. A terrible convulsion, its sound unable to manifest, continued. Avoiding the sight, Hosanna, with a voice stricken with fear, cautiously asked.

"…What happens to him now?"

"He will perceive the last few minutes before his death as hundreds of years. And during those hundreds of years, he will burn alone in the fires of hell, screaming in agony as his body is torn apart."

As he said, a few minutes later Bertrail's spasms ceased. As the man removed his hand from the head he was holding, the hair, which had gone stark white within minutes as if aged by hundreds of years, began to fall out onto the sheets. His shriveled face was frozen in a grotesque mask of pain, mouth agape in a terrible expression.

"Is he dead?"

"Yes."

The man stood up from his place, casting a scornful look at Bertrail's corpse as he muttered.

"Even this was too peaceful an end for him."

"…"

"Let's go, Hosanna. We have to finish what the sage asked us to do."

"Just that? What about Gayle and Doyle…"

“Yes. We’ll look for those two you’re so concerned about.”

In the middle of speaking, the man furrowed his brow, turning his head to look out of the heavy window.

“…It seems like someone is coming.”

“Eh?”

No sooner had Hosanna questioned, a rough shout accompanied by the sound of horse hooves could be heard from outside. The man, listening to the noise, lifted a corner of his mouth, muttering.

“Seems we found the real priests who were supposed to be here sooner than expected. It won’t be easy to leave without a trace. We’ll have to escape using your power.”

Hosanna’s surprised expression quickly froze over.

“Understood. Give me your hand……”

Moments later, the knights who had rushed to the top of the tower unlocked the seven padlocks and kicked the door open to enter.

“Stay still, you charlatans! State your identities now…! Huh?”

“There’s no one inside!”

“Magic and magic tools are unusable here, how could they possibly…!”

“Search the area thoroughly!”

As the confused knights scoured the narrow interior of the tower, the corpse on the bed continued to lie coldly like garbage, growing colder still.

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Chapter 216

Light blazed and space tore open in the most tucked-away alley of the Seventh Wall of the Empire's capital. Two men dressed in pilgrim's robes emerged from the opened space, unperturbed by the startled rats scurrying away. They calmly surveyed their surroundings.

"Is this the place we remembered?"

"Yes. Just in case, I set our location here."

"Good. It seems we are close to the meeting place as well. Hosanna, put on your hat and gloves. We're moving immediately."

The man with a horrific burn scar covering half of his face, Nahan, donned a pilgrim's hat, which concealed his features up to his neck. Despite having just committed a murder, his face remained disturbingly serene. He put on long gloves, entirely concealing his skin, and began to walk as if nothing had happened. Beside him, Hosanna, looking a little anxious, followed suit and put on his hat and gloves. He limped slightly as he stuck close behind Nahan.

"Why have the noble priests of light come to such a desolate place…? Would you like to try some medicine that I sell?"

"…"

"Gentlemen, who are you looking for? Shall I help you…?"

As they exited the spiderweb-like alley, their surroundings swarmed with cautious and greedy eyes. Nahan ignored an old man who extended a hand with a sinister smile and passed by, but Hosanna didn't know how to react. He stopped, only to have an old man grab his wrist.

“Don’t be a nuisance. Scram.”

Nahan, who had returned, spat out a word to the old man who was holding Hosanna. With a scream, as if they had seen a terrifying monster, the menacing glances momentarily vanished.

“Th-thank you, Young Master. Did you use your power?”

“Yes.”

“You shouldn’t get caught because of me… I’m sorry.”

Nahan disregarded Hosanna’s apology, pulling him by the arm, and resumed walking. This time, they were able to make it to the main road without any interruptions. Ordinary folks bustling in the market entrance didn’t find anything odd about the two priests in pilgrim’s attire.

It had been a while since they naturally melted into the crowd and started walking when Nahan finally opened his mouth again.

“Hosanna.”

“Yes, Young Master.”

“There probably won’t be any big problems, but just in case, I’m telling you this beforehand. Once we reach the meeting place, do not open your mouth. If there’s an emergency, and I give you a signal, open up the space immediately. Somewhere we can escape to.”

“…Understood.”

“Don’t let your guard down. We’re almost there. One of the brothers sent by the sage will be waiting there.”

The cruel voice echoed somberly from within the pilgrim’s hat. They entered an alley close to the Sixth Wall and arrived in front of an old house located amidst aged, dilapidated inns. As soon as

Nahan checked the small plaque attached to the heavily rusted gate, a man emerged from the alley behind them.

“You’re late. Do you know how long I’ve waited?”

“Well, it just happened.”

“Nahan, why do you always take the sage’s requests so lightly…”

The man who was about to speak further with a frown, let out a sigh and dropped his gaze.

“Just come inside for now. I’m definitely reporting this.”

“Do as you wish, brother.”

Nahan followed him, his face entirely devoid of fear. When the man knocked on the rusty door, someone peered out from inside after a moment.

“When did the priests arrive? This isn’t a temple.”

“We heard there was someone here who wished to mend what cannot be mended.”

The brash tone of Nahan’s words immediately changed the expression in the eyes of the man who emerged from within. He scanned the three of them from top to bottom before sharply opening his mouth.

“State your name.”

“Star of Nagran.”

“…You’ve come in strange attire.”

Only then did the man snort and step aside.

“Enter. The person you seek has already arrived. But, we must perform a small check to ensure you carry no danger before you proceed, I hope you understand.”

Nahan, Hosanna, and another man patiently waited as the host checked their pockets. He found nothing on Nahan but, when he pulled out scriptures and holy symbols from Hosanna’s possession, he adopted a visibly shaken expression. He seemed to doubt if they were truly priests.

“Fine. Follow me.”

The house inside was very dark and smelled musty. However, following the host up to a room on the second floor revealed an improbably clean space. In front of the curtain that covered half the room, incense had been lit, casting an enchanting fragrance. Through the faint light cast by the incense, Nahan and Hosanna could see the silhouette of someone sitting behind the curtain. Although seated, the robust stature of the middle-aged man was clearly visible.

“Master, the guests have arrived.”

“Finally, they are here.”

The shadow of the figure behind the curtain moved gently, waving a hand.

“Sit down there.”

If there was a typical noble demeanor, full of arrogance and formality, this man embodied it. Even after all three had taken their seats, the man did not speak for quite some time, observing them as if scrutinizing something.

Any ordinary person might have been too intimidated or terrified to speak first, but even after a considerable time had passed, the

guests maintained their composure. Finally, the man behind the curtain seemed satisfied and broke the silence.

“Hmm. Indeed, you do not seem ordinary.”

“…”

“Thank you for coming. We can skip the boring parts about where I heard about you and why I invited you.”

“Yes.”

At Nahan’s response, the middle-aged man chuckled quietly.

“Even though I am in exile due to unfortunate circumstances, a friend of mine, who used to be an Apeto’s collaborator, highly praised your abilities. Frankly, when I first heard about it, I doubted how a man could cure a disease of the mind. But seeing you today, oddly enough, I am convinced.”

“…”

“I will get to the point. Can you show me once again the miracle you showed him?”

A miracle. It was a heavy word. After a brief silence, Nahan nodded.

“Certainly, it’s possible. Given a few conditions are met.”

“Conditions. You mean seeing the face and making direct eye contact?”

“Yes.”

“So, it means that it’s possible right now if you just see the face?”

“That’s right.”

“More bold and succinct than I thought.”

After making that evaluation, the middle-aged noble tapped the end of the cane he was holding. After a moment, he seemed to have made a decision and gestured to the attendant standing in the corner of the room.

“Good. The curtain may now be drawn back.”

“Yes, Master.”

The guide respectfully approached and pulled back the curtain. The man hidden inside finally revealed himself, grinning haughtily at Nahan and Hosanna.

“Do you know who I am?”

“We do not.”

“Aren’t you curious?”

“We understand it’s not our place to be curious about your identity.”

“Indeed. Clever. Now, let’s see your faces.”

Hosanna hesitated for a moment. But after seeing the subtle gesture from Nahan, indicating that it was safe, he removed his pilgrim’s hat.

“…”

Unlike the other, more ordinarily looking person, Nahan and Hosanna were distinctively noticeable, yet the noble man showed little reaction upon seeing their faces. This was due to Nahan’s ability, which he had employed the moment they entered, enabling him to control the small space and distort what was seen.

“Very well. I’ll give you one chance. I’ve been plagued by a horrendous migraine for a long time. If you can cure it, consider it a small test passed, and I’ll open the way for an introduction to the person who truly needs you. But if you can’t…you may not leave here in one piece today.”

It was a threat, not a test. But Nahan didn’t flinch; instead, he gave a chilling, sly smile. He stood up and walked closer to the curtain. The middle-aged man leaning on his extravagant, jewel-encrusted cane watched him.

“Judging from those rings on your fingers, I can guess how much you’ve suffered.”

The noble wore several rings, each with a large gemstone, designed to press against his temples for relief.

“You recognized them.”

“Could you now look into my eyes, please?”

“Like this…”

The moment their gazes met, the haughty expression on the noble’s face slackened in surprise.

“…”

“Hey. You’re not intending to trick our master, are you?”

The guide, worried that Nahan might be up to something, drew his sword from its sheath. However, as his gaze briefly met Nahan’s, his face, too, went blank in astonishment. An eerie illusion started to disrupt their sight and hearing. The sword clattered to the ground, but no one responded to the sound.

“Idiots.”

Nahan murmured towards them, opening his mouth with an expression like he was looking at insects.

“You all can’t even resist making eye contact, and yet you keep doing repulsive things.”

“Nahan, we can’t kill them. The sage said…”

“I’m not going to kill them, so be quiet, will you? You’re distracting me.”

At Nahan’s response, his comrade scowled. Hosanna looked at them anxiously, but Nahan didn’t care and put his hand on the noble man’s head. Then, the man, as if he’d seen a delightful fantasy, broke into a wide grin and chuckled while rubbing his hand.

“Hehe, Duke Diarca… Yes, this is the method that Durmand found for His Highness the Duke. Now that the Crown Prince is better, he no longer has to worry or lose sleep anymore. Those poor souls, stars, or whatever they were, have been taken care of, so there’s no issue with what comes next. Please remember my loyalty even after His Highness the Crown Prince ascends to the throne. That would be enough for me…”

When Nahan withdrew his hand, the noble man’s face returned to its blank state. Nahan looked down at his face, lost in thought for a moment before turning his head. Both Hosanna and his comrade couldn’t hide their surprise at hearing the names of such significant figures.

“Diarca and the Crown Prince, huh? Did the Sage know about this?”

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Chapter 217

“Diarca, and the Crown Prince. Did the sage know about this?”

“No. He didn’t. If the Durmand that I know of is the same Baron Durmand, he’s a powerful noble from the Diarca Duchy. Had I known, would I have risked coming here in madness?”

Their colleague spoke so, but Nahan did not nod. He only stared quietly at the man’s face. A cold sweat began to bead on the man’s forehead under Nahan’s gaze, as if trying to pierce his thoughts.

“Nahan. You’re not planning to use your power on me, are you? Isn’t the reason they contacted us after stepping on our tails because you used tricks to infiltrate Apeto? The sage really”

“Hey, brother. Have I ever done you harm?”

A cold smile spread across Nahan’s scarred face.

“Doubts like that aren’t good. In many ways.”

“I, I didn’t mean…”

“Anyway, that’s that.”

Nahan quickly changed his expression and turned sharply.

“It is true that I borrowed the power of the sage to infiltrate Apeto and put a line on the sidelines. I came here to repay and clean up, but I never thought that such a big man would be caught… What should we do?”

His gray eyes scanned over Baron Durmand and his subordinate coldly.

“It’s certain that this guy needed power to cure mental illness. After verifying that the power is real, he probably planned to introduce it to the Crown Prince, achieve his goal, and then deal with the aftermath.”

“Deal with?”

The colleague’s face turned white once again.

“Nahan, can’t you erase their memories with your power?”

“My power is to manipulate illusions, not memories. It’s much easier to drive them mad by showing continuous illusions. Or we could just kill them now, while they’re defenseless.”

At Nahan’s cold response, the man bit his lip.

“We can’t do that. Killing a high-ranking noble for such a reason is far too dangerous. Instead… let’s pretend to cure his migraine and then run away. I will explain it to the sage.”

“If they believe we cured them, won’t they keep looking for us? Didn’t you complain about how hard it was to evade the Peletta Knights? You want to add the Diarca to that?”

“That’s true, but we need to let the sage know so that he can come up with a plan. And in the first place, all of that is because of you!”

“Shh. If you raise your voice, they might wake from the illusion.”

The man, who had started to raise his voice, was taken aback by Nahan’s words and shut his mouth. He looked anxiously at Baron Durmand, who was lost in the illusion. Thankfully, the Baron was still swaying in a daze, regardless of the loud conversation.

The man sighed softly and spoke in a hushed voice.

“Anyway, the reason our situation is becoming increasingly dangerous is because of you. If it weren’t for you, Gayle and Doyle would still be with us, and the Peletta Knights wouldn’t be so relentless.”

“Gayle and Doyle. The sage didn’t look for them either.”

“Have you forgotten who Peletta Duke is? How do we find them when they’re caught by the Cavalry that’s much stronger than us? I don’t think they’re alive. They’re probably already”

The colleague gritted his teeth and turned away.

“So please, stop taking risks and just heed the sage’s advice for once! Who do you think pulled you out of that deathly swamp?”

The moment his words ended, an icy chill seemed to plunge the atmosphere to sub-zero.

The man stifled the laugh he had barely managed to muster and stiffened at the sight of Nahan, his face expressionless. He raised his hands in immediate apology.

“… I apologize. I know you dislike hearing about it, but I spoke without thinking in my anxiety.”

“It was Hosanna and the sage himself who saved me. Neither you nor your brothers have a place to debate that.”

Nahan responded with an unnervingly calm voice.

“And has the sage ever objected to my saving the brothers?”

“He hasn’t, but still”

Before the man could add anything to his muttered words, as if helpless, Nahan, his lips slightly curved up, cut him off.

“Both you and I owe our lives to someone else’s rescue. Don’t you think it’s too cowardly to refuse to save other brothers in danger just because you don’t want to disturb the peace you’ve regained? That would be an unfair thing to say to Gayle and Doyle, who chose to risk their lives and came to help me, knowing the danger.”

For a moment, Hosanna, standing behind him, clenched his fists with a gloomy expression. Nahan knew that he felt guilty for roping Gayle and Doyle into their troubles, but he said nothing and pretended not to know, simply staring at his comrade.

“…”

In the end, the man closed his mouth, his face a mix of anger and complexity. Nahan turned back with a peaceful expression and opened his mouth leisurely, gazing at the two men lost in fantasy.

“In any case, I will follow your advice this time not to kill people indiscriminately. But before that… We should ask what problem the Crown Prince has that made him look for us.”

“Why are you doing that again? I’ve told you not to do anything unnecessary!”

“Be quiet. Even the sage needs to know the reasons.”

Ignoring his comrade coolly, Nahan moved forward, and as he waved his hand lightly once more, Baron Durmand seemed to suddenly notice something and looked around. The man, still staggering with a cloudy gaze, opened his mouth as if bewitched.

“When did I get here… Hmm? Oh, sorry. You’re asking if the Crown Prince is okay? Stop it.”

The nobleman sitting in his place moved his hand as if smoking and sighed.

“Everything has been chaotic since that damned assassination attempt. Despite the scars on his face healing completely, he constantly sees red scars and has smashed every mirror. Just like those Apeto bastards. If he had stayed a little longer, he would have had enough time to reflect and bow down to Duke Diarca. Who knew it would turn out like this.”

Hearing the words, Nahan’s eyes narrowed. His comrade was instinctively terrified at the thought of having heard the deepest secret of the imperial family.

“He must rise again. He must. How did we put him in that place? It’s unthinkable that he would fall here”

The man finished speaking and stared blankly into space, his eyes lost in thought once again.

“The Crown Prince’s insanity, indeed.”

Nahan absentmindedly stroked his chin as he murmured,

“That’s just about when they would contact the likes of us.”

“Na-Nahan, you don’t mean to tell me you’re actually interested in that story? I thought you said you would rather die than deal with nobility.”

When his comrade exclaimed in shock, Nahan shrugged as though he was stating the obvious.

“Of course, I hate it. No interest whatsoever. What these swinish characters do or don’t do is of no concern to me. If I can help it, I’d prefer to avoid them for life.”

At Nahan’s retort, his comrade frowned and shook his head.

“Then we should hurry and pretend to treat them before escaping. The moment they realize we’ve heard this story, we’re as good as dead!”

“Understood, so try to keep your composure, brother. I’ll end the illusion soon.”

After a while, Nahan showed a few more illusions to the nobleman and his subordinate before flicking his finger. They were left believing that they had merely had a dream.

“From now on, you will not feel any migraines. Once a few days pass and you begin to believe, contact us at the same place.”

“Is that true?”

The nobleman, skeptical but hopeful, touched his face and smiled.

“Good. I’ll let you leave unharmed for today. Begone.”

As an arrogant noble, he believed that sparing their lives was a generous enough favor. Having received their dismissal, the three of them swiftly retreated and left the premises. Only once they had moved a considerable distance from the house did Hosanna, sweat glistening on his forehead, dare to speak.

“…What if the illusion doesn’t work? You said it might not work on those with strong mental fortitude.”

“For me, that doesn’t matter, but those kinds of characters have such weak mental power that they fell into my illusions without me exerting any effort. Don’t worry, Hosanna, there won’t be a problem.”

Nahan replied nonchalantly. Their colleague listening nearby interjected with a skeptical face.

“Is there anyone who could escape your ability?”

“Of course, there is.”

“Have you seen them?”

“Yes. Several times.”

At Nahan’s reply, his colleague blinked in surprise. He hadn’t expected that response.

“Oh… I see. Whoever they are, I hope they come to our Star of Nagran. If they are that mentally strong, even the sage would be pleased.”

“He said he didn’t want to.”

“Pardon?”

Nahan didn’t give any further explanation. His colleague, assuming he had heard wrong, quickly forgot about the matter. His mind filled with thoughts of reporting to the sage, he bid farewell to Nahan and Hosanna with a heavy heart and disappeared in another direction.

Nahan watched in silence as he departed, then turned to Hosanna and asked,

“Hosanna, what do you think the sage would think about that story?”

“Pardon?”

“It’s the Crown Prince.”

“Well… I don’t know.”

Hosanna glanced around and shook his head with a bewildered expression.

“He’s a good person… He wouldn’t put us in danger twice. I think…”

“A good person.”

Nahan’s lips closed tightly.

“Yes, let’s hope so.”

“Why? Are you worried?”

“No. Never mind. Also, it seems that the swinish character we just met doesn’t trust us and has sent someone to tail us. We should teleport directly across the market from the next alley.”

Hosanna was startled and widened his eyes, but he didn’t turn to look behind. He nodded and shifted his stride with feigned nonchalance.

A moment later, a flash of light streaked from beyond the alley. By the time the henchman of Baron Durmand, who had been tailing them, sluggishly pursued, there was no one left in the alley.

—

“Yuder.”

At Ever’s voice, Yuder turned his head and squinted at the rising dawn sun.

“Yes?”

“Do you really think we might be dispatched to the West?”

“Didn’t you hear from the Commander? I thought he mentioned it to the Deputy Commanders.”

“We only got a brief message, so it doesn’t feel real.”

Ever, who had frowned as if to say, ‘isn’t it obvious?’ quickly broke into a smile.

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Chapter 218

“But I thought you, Yuder, being able to meet him directly, might have heard something more detailed.”

Yuder scanned the surroundings. The training ground was nearly deserted, the dawn training period nearing its end.

It had been about three days since Kishiar had announced his plan to deploy the Cavalry to accomplish two tasks at once. The cycle was not yet finished, but he tried his best to keep up with work, using letters and other means.

There was not much issue since only three Deputy Commanders and Yuder, who often interacted with the Commander, were involved in the tasks. However, Yuder wondered how the other Deputy Commanders perceived the permission he had obtained to freely enter the Commander’s office under the pretext of sorting letters.

Neither Ever, Steiber, nor Kanna would ostracize or dislike Yuder merely because he received special treatment from Kishiar, but one could never be sure. Yuder answered as cautiously as possible.

“There wasn’t much difference for me either. The Commander was often away.”

It wasn’t a lie. Even though Kishiar had allowed Yuder to stay in the Commander’s office as long as he wanted, he had only shown his face once in three days. And even then, he had appeared with a weary face, received the letter, and entered the room again with a regretful smile.

“I see… He still seems quite busy.”

“But he has already decided on the matter of the Western mission, so I think he will provide more details soon.”

Kishiar’s image faded from his mind at Ever’s worried words. Fearing that she might worry excessively, Yuder steered the conversation in a different direction.

“But, Ever. Are you not worried about having to fight monsters if we go West?”

“Hm. Have you forgotten why I first awakened, Yuder?”

Ever grinned and clenched and unclenched her fist in a playful gesture. Power flowed like a ripple over the special glove designed to reveal the fingers, disappearing quickly.

“I slew dozens of monsters that were ravaging our village right after I awakened. I’m not scared of that at all. What worries me more are leading the Shin Division and members who wont listen.”

“Are you sure, considering that the monsters that will appear there might be entirely different from the ones we have observed and learned about so far?”

“Absolutely. I’m stronger than I was then, and now I have comrades I can rely on. Are you worried, Yuder?”

He had tried not to create reasons for worry and was confident about the results. But listening to Ever’s confident smile and direct question, he felt strangely unsettled.

The members had learned the names, appearances, and weaknesses of monsters that frequently appeared across the continent, preparing for the mission that they would eventually undertake. As this information was the accumulation of people’s long-term efforts, it was highly accurate. If one memorized that, they would be confident in defeating any monster.

But Yuder had realized that this information was useless in practice when he was first dispatched to suppress the monsters in the West in his previous life. The monsters recorded were only a part. Most of them had not been recorded properly because most of the witnesses had died, or there were several times more monsters that were entirely new.

He had meticulously planned to avoid experiencing such a situation again, and countless rehearsals took place within his head, but it was an immutable law that he could never guarantee a 100% certainty. Even with his exceptional abilities and plans, it was impossible for him alone to control everything.

Yuder condensed all these thoughts into a simple response.

“Expectation and worry are separate matters.”

“I suppose so.”

Ever, who gently nodded in agreement, cracked a small smile.

“Still, I somehow feel this mission will turn out well too. It has always been the case so far, hasn’t it? We were really worried during the Harvest Festival, but it worked out well, and the trial of the Apeto family also ended satisfactorily. Plus…”

Looking at her enumerating on her fingers, a faint smile crossed his face. As she rattled off her words, it somehow felt as if she was summarizing and praising all the issues he had resolved since his return.

‘Yes, just like she said, everything has been going smoothly so far.’

“…So, it will be alright. Ah, did I just talk like Kanna just now?”

Looking somewhat sheepish, Ever admitted that she may have picked up the carefree personality of the girl she spent most of her time with lately. In response, Yuder shook his head.

“Thanks to you, I feel a bit more relaxed now. Thank you.”

“I’m glad to hear that. I used to be a worrywart too, but my perspective changed quite a bit after watching the trials of the Apeto family, so I try not to be like that.”

“What changed your perspective at that time?”

It seemed she hadn’t taken on any special duties related to the trials beyond escorting the witnesses. Intrigued by what might have occurred, Yuder asked, to which she responded that nothing in particular happened.

“Just from standing behind the Commander and watching the trials alongside those who came forward to testify, I had a realization.”

“What was it?”

“Even the nobles that I used to fear turned out to be nothing special in the court.”

Ever revealed a playful grin.

“They looked pathetic trying to reduce their mistakes, and their stubbornness or crying to avoid punishment didn’t seem noble at all. It was also funny to see those who tried to intimidate the witnesses run away without a word at the display of my power.”

“…”

“Do you remember? When all of us from the Cavalry gathered to drink, we had a conversation like this. Yuder, you said that I could

become someone who steps forward and speaks up for the weak, regardless of the circumstances around us.”

At first, he wondered when he had said such a thing, but soon enough, the memories came flooding back.

‘Was it around the time when I first met Kiolle Diarca in the training field and knocked him down?’

At the training field of the Imperial Knights, the trainees who were merely commoners and had just joined the Cavalry couldn’t say anything when the members of the Imperial Knights, who were against the use of the training field, behaved rudely. Ever regretted not being able to step forward at the time, but Yuder, who came from the future, told her there was no need for that. In a few years, they would become so powerful that they wouldn’t even notice something like the Imperial Knights. All they lacked was the realization and experience of their own strength.

“…Yes, I remember.”

“At that time, I doubted if it was possible, but while helping those who came for the trial, I realized that I had truly become someone who could do that. Can you believe it?”

Ever described it as a novel and wonderful feeling.

“So now, I’m not afraid of anything anymore. I realized that having faith in the future and confidence in myself can be this much fun. And all of that faith came from the Commander, you, Yuder, and our fellow Cavalry members.”

“Hmm. I…”

“You’re trying to say you didn’t really do anything there, right?”

When he started to mumble uncomfortably due to the praise at the end of her nice speech, Ever interrupted him.

“Don’t say that. You, Yuder, have done enough to earn such praise. Even now, you’re helping me by observing my abilities more meticulously than I am. How could I not be grateful?”

“…That’s just what I did while training together.”

“Everyone is very jealous of me. You know, some people were really upset because they thought I alone had the opportunity to train one-on-one with you, right?”

Yuder nodded awkwardly. At this, Ever burst out laughing and patted him on the shoulder.

“Even the Commander added in a letter to me that he was jealous of the great opportunity I had gotten. Can you believe it?”

“The Commander said that?”

Did the Commander insert such a thing in between the letters to the Deputy Commanders, even though he couldn’t go out because of his duties? When Yuder swept down her face with a feeling of bewilderment about five times greater than before, Ever’s laughter grew louder.

It felt very strange. The past and the present tangled in his mind, then unraveled and disappeared into a blank slate. Unable to figure out what to say in response, Yuder remained silent until the fully risen sun in the sky above caught his eye.

“Ah, it’s time for breakfast now. Let’s go inside.”

Yuder, following the footsteps of Ever who brushed off her seat and stood up, turned his gaze slightly. He thought of someone who

might be behind the curtains drawn so as not to see inside, on the top floor of the sparkling Cavalry building in the light.

Suddenly, he felt an illusion as if the heat rising from the inside of his chest spread to the end of his lips.

—

“The Duke of Peletta sent a reply saying he wouldn’t help us?”

An astounded voice echoed within the beautiful reception room of the Tain Duchy’s main residence. The Duke of Tain, who stylishly trimmed his beard, rarely fiddled with it carelessly, but at this moment he couldn’t hide his rage and unwittingly roughened his chin.

“What the hell does this mean? Did his liver swell because he won a trial against Apeto once?”

“Exactly, he has no intention of collaborating with the Tain Duchy, but he does agree that the situation with the monsters appearing in the west doesn’t look ordinary, so he said he would dispatch the Cavalry separately.”

“So, he’s saying the same thing, isn’t he, Theo?”

The sharp gaze of Duke Tain turned toward Theorado, the Commander of the Imperial Knights, who was sitting in front of him. Commander Theorado also happened to be the Duke’s cousin.

“He’s saying he won’t cooperate with us but he’ll deal with the monsters in the west on his own? What kind of nonsense is that? If the people sent by Duke Peletta roam and wreak havoc in our territory, we won’t be able to say a word.”

“In that case, couldn’t you send the knights and mercenaries as you initially planned and draw a line to prevent any approach?”

“The timing is the problem.”

Duke Tain mumbled as he rubbed his forehead.

“I’ve recently sent a large number of goods through a newly developed sea trade route. In order to protect that, I’ve already dispatched all those who can be mobilized. Who would’ve known that right after that, such a large amount of monsters would appear?”

Duke Tain, sighing, turned his head and looked at Commander Theorado.

“Theo, can you lend me just a few of the Imperial Knights?”

“That would be difficult.”

“We could use the pretext of training to send them over there.”

“Don’t you know? A few months ago, we sent a few knights, including Kiolle Diarca, to the East for training for the same reason. After an accident occurred there, the oversight has become strict.”

“Damn that Diarca. Worthless as always.”

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Chapter 219

“Damn that Diarca. Worthless as always.”

Duke Tain spat out a curse, breaking his gaze in another direction and resting a hand on his forehead.

“All that drivel about making use of Duke Peletta to sort out the Western territories. Was this a ploy to watch me flounder? Quite possible, knowing that sly fox.”

“…”

Commander Theorado responded by merely nodding slightly instead of replying. His disinterest in the Duke’s grumbling was palpable.

“Theo, do you think this is only my problem? What exactly were you doing while I was gallivanting in the South for months over investment matters? You should’ve informed me sooner about the situation in the capital… No, forget it.”

The Duke started to say something to his cousin, but abruptly shut his mouth, not wanting to stoke his rage further. He couldn’t forget the fact that he wouldn’t have contacted Theorado if not for this incident. Their notorious indifference towards others, combined with an obsessive digging into their interests, was as good as a birthmark ingrained in their blood.

The only difference was that for Theorado it was the sword, and for the Duke, it was speculative investment.

‘I bet he’s going to argue that he’s done his part just by forwarding a letter to Duke Peletta on my behalf.’

A sigh slipped out involuntarily, leaving a bitter taste in his mouth. He hadn't expected Duke Peletta, of all people, residing like a parasite within the Imperial Knights' territory, to refuse the request of the Imperial Knight Commander. Including Theorado's seeming indifference, it was utterly despicable and infuriating.

Duke Tain rubbed his chin nervously, muttering under his breath.

"Theo, is there any way you could use your power to get the Cavalry and Duke Peletta to leave the Imperial Knights' territory?"

"The Imperial Knights' territory isn't my personal property. It belongs to His Majesty the Emperor. It's impossible with my authority as the Imperial Knight Commander."

"What about if you went personally to ask?"

At the Duke's words, Commander Theorado frowned.

"Do I really need to go that far? Can't you just slightly compromise the pace of the investment hub development beyond the border?"

"Compromise? You make it sound so easy!"

"Even if I went now, it's unlikely that I would be able to meet Duke Peletta."

"What? Why's that? Does he consider us, the Tain, lesser than Apeto? Even if it's the Emperor's will?"

Duke Tain glared furiously. After a moment of silence, Commander Theorado spoke softly.

"He hasn't left the grounds since his visit to the Imperial Mage's office. It's not certain, but it seems he may not be well."

"Not well?"

Duke Tain echoed before rubbing his chin as though something came to mind.

“Ah. You’re referring to that thing that half of the Dukes experience. So, it persists even after awakening?”

“I’m not sure about that.”

“Typical. The idea that someone on the brink of death would suddenly recover just because they obtained some kind of power, like the Awakener, is preposterous. Those fools of Apeto are indeed idiots. To leap into an investment that won’t profit them just based on that. If I were the Duke of Apeto, I would never approve such foolish requests for support.”

“So, it is only natural that Duke Apeto is in the state he is now,” concluded Duke Tain after pouring out his blunt words, his mood noticeably improved. Suddenly, as if a delightful thought had crossed his mind, he smiled.

“Hmm, Theo.”

“Yes?”

“If Duke Peletta’s condition is really as bad as they say, he wouldn’t personally appear for the monster subjugation mission. He would probably send his underlings, wouldn’t he?”

“That seems likely.”

“Then, it seems you must send another letter to Duke Peletta.”

A cold smile passed over Duke Tain’s face.

“Write that we regret his refusal but understand it, and as the situation has become urgent, he should send his men to the West as soon as possible.”

“Will that be sufficient?”

“Yes. And as the ruler of the family responsible for the West, I must also notify and prepare my territory there.”

‘I will make you pay for daring to ignore me.’ Duke Tain, swallowing the words unspoken, twisted his lips in a sly smile.

—

Recently, responses to the replies that Kishiar had sent to Theo, the Commander of the Imperial Knights, and Prince Ejain of Nelarn had arrived.

Yuder quickly opened the two letters and skimmed their contents.

‘Tain has written that although they regret our refusal to cooperate, they urge us to go West as soon as possible. Prince Ejain wrote that the situation is urgent and he will set off ahead of us. He suggests we meet near the Great Sarain Forest…’

Great Sarain Forest. Yuder murmured the name, slightly furrowing his brow.

‘So they intend to go through there.’

The Great Sarain Forest was a massive woodland that could envelop the entire Western border of the empire. It spanned the borders of no less than four nations, including the Orr Empire. With the forests tangled vegetation growing back faster than it could be cleared and its perilously rough terrain, anyone lost would meet their end. This was why handling the monsters in the West was more difficult than in other regions.

Also, the fastest route to Nelarn, Prince Ejain’s homeland, had to pass through that forest.

‘It must be an incredibly urgent situation.’

He neatly folded the two letters and looked over at the Commander’s seat. It was empty again today.

Was it an illusion that Kishiars condition didn’t seem to be improving at all? He was fine the rare times they had spoken, but since then, he had returned to this state.

Was it that hard to exert one’s natural strength?

Yuder sighed and shifted his gaze toward the corridor. Working alone without Nathan made the fact that Kishiar was there feel oddly like a fantasy. The only sound filling the quiet space was the crackling of the magic stone stove.

Suddenly, he got up and, with the letters in hand, headed towards the inner part of the corridor. The tiles were laid in a way that it was hard to silence one’s footsteps, in anticipation of intruders. But to someone who had lived in this space for nearly ten years, it was not a difficult obstacle.

Finally, after slowly making his way between the slight gaps in the tiles, he stood before the Commander’s bedroom. A large door stood in the way of his entry.

‘…This is too impulsive and rash.’

A cold voice echoed in his mind.

‘Why are you here?’

Indeed. He himself couldn’t entirely understand why he had acted on such an impulse.

Kishiar understood why he was locked alone within, fending off others. He wasn’t resting; he was battling the vast energy within him.

If he deemed himself unable to meet others, that judgment must have been correct.

Even though he knew…

"…"

The hand he'd raised as if to knock stopped at the door. For a brief moment, Yuder was torn between a peculiar urge to knock on the door in front of him and his rational mind. Yet, that moment was shattered by the sound of knocking coming from not too far away.

Yuder glanced at the closed door briefly before turning his body. Unlike when he arrived, his movement to leave was incredibly swift.

Heading back toward the office where there was a magic stone stove, another soft knocking sound was heard as he approached the door.

"Who is it?"

"Ah, Yuder. So you are there. It's me, Kanna. I've been looking for you and they told me you'd be in the Commanders office at this time."

A familiar voice sounded from outside the door. Before he opened the door, Yuder adjusted his uniform robe with a tug. Suddenly, a peculiar mark was revealed by the reflection of the light streaming in through the window above the dark blue double doors.

Five indents, as if something blunt had been pressed hard into them. It was clear that they were artificially created, and peculiarly, they were a bit higher than his eye level. The moment his gaze was stolen by those indents, Yuder suddenly realized what they were.

'…Fingers?'

The day he couldn’t open this door, Kishiar had braced his hand around there. Even if it were a wooden door, there would have been dozens of protections applied to it, making it harder than steel. Yet, he couldn’t believe how easily it was dented.

“Yuder?”

“Ah. Sorry. I was tidying up a bit. I’ll come out now.”

Yuder opened the door and stepped outside. Kanna, who had been about to say something with an apologetic expression, suddenly cocked her head.

“Did the Commander happen to be out today? If so, I could directly speak and pass on the message to the Commander here…”

“…No. He’s not here. Just tell me.”

Fortunately, Kanna didn’t ask any further and opened her mouth as she moved her steps down the stairs first.

“I’m sorry for bothering you when you’re busy. It’s about Gayle and Doyle.”

“What happened to them?”

He thought that perhaps they had caused some accident being allowed to freely wander within the Cavalry, but Kanna started a completely different story.

“Gayle and Doyle originally lived in the West and drifted into Star of Nagran, so we thought that one of their bases should be there, and we’ve been trying to read the information. While they were helping with the dishes today, I used my abilities a bit and it seems that I’ve read the correct locations, maybe because their guard was down.”

“Where are they?”

“One is deep within the Great Sarain Forest, another near the Southern Desert, and the last base is… If I read it correctly, it seems to be near the mountain where the Red Stone was.”

“The Rik Mountain range?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Kanna, who had just nodded, soon wore a serious expression.

“Could the assassins who attacked the Commander at that time have been from there? And we’re supposed to head to the West soon. We might encounter them again. That thought worries me.”

‘Indeed.’

It didn’t seem likely that a guy like Nahan who forced strange beliefs and called all Awakeners his siblings would be involved in such actions. But, if their speculation about the division within the group called Star of Nagran was correct, it was a possibility.

‘If we exclude the fact that those who could access the top-secret information related to the retrieval of the Red Stone were extremely limited within the Empire…’

Moreover, if it was the Great Sarain Forest in the West, it was indeed the destination they were about to head to soon. Several thoughts crossed his mind in an instant.

“Thanks for letting me know. I will report to Commander and Zuckerman.”

After replying, Yuder added a remark after a moment of silence.

“There’s no need to worry.”

“Mm.”

Only then did Kanna turn around with a much brighter face. Yuder added another variable, the ‘Star of Nagran,’ to the plan for the Western monster extermination mission he held within him.

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Chapter 220

“Sir Aile. Why are you standing here?”

After Kanna had disappeared at a brisk pace, saying that she would go down first for training, it wasn’t long before Nathan Zuckerman emerged from the opposite side. He was holding a familiar box in his hand.

“I thought it was about time for you to finish your work… Is there a problem?”

He seemed curious, as the location where Aile had been standing was midway down the stairs leading from the Commander’s office.

“No, I was just about to leave. I had some discussions with Kanna who had just arrived to report something”

“But isn’t that a letter for the Commander in your hand?”

Only then did Yuder realize that he was still holding the letters that were supposed to be left on Kishiar’s desk. He was considerably flustered.

“Ah, yes. I just need to return this and then I can go.”

“Then give it to me. I was about to go in anyway.”

“Yes, but there is one more thing I need to tell you before that.”

While handing the letter to Nathan, Yuder relayed the story that Kanna had shared. He responded that he would report it directly to Kishiar after listening to the story with a serious expression.

“It’s rather startling, the power of an Awakener is truly amazing. We, the Peletta Knights, couldnt have discovered this information no matter how hard we tried. Thank you.”

“It was Kanna who did this, so you should thank her.”

After making sure that the gratitude which should have been directed towards Kanna didn’t veer off course, Yuder cautiously asked Nathan another question.

“If the Peletta Knights have been pursuing them as well, have you had any other gains?”

“We are still in the process of tracking But as of now, there is nothing definitive I can tell you.”

He wished he could know more about the situation, even if it wasn’t certain yet. However, that cautious knight was not likely to reveal any more to Yuder.

‘It’s unfortunate. Unless something is confirmed, Kishiar won’t speak up. I guess I have no choice but to find out on my own.’

Until now, Kishiar had assigned all tracking-related tasks to the Peletta Knights, not the Cavalry. It was a natural choice, as the Cavalry were less experienced, but it was a bit disappointing that they lacked information.

‘I should consider assigning some of my five nominating rights to them. Eventually, I will have to select some people within the Cavalry to handle such tasks exclusively…’

Yuder recalled the nominating rights he had never used so far, and remembered that he had not yet asked Kishiar if he could include Enon in it.

‘I should ask him once the cycle has passed.’

Thinking of Kishiar, he naturally remembered the five fingerprints left on the door.

Were they really his fingerprints left that day? A strange mixture of emotions, both wanting to go up and check again for sure and not wanting to, came to him. Unconsciously, he glanced up at the Commander's office door, and perhaps Nathan Zuckerman noticed something odd because he paused and opened his mouth.

"Sir Aile. Is there anything else you need to do up there?"

"No, there isnt. It's just that"

After hastily denying it, Yuder suddenly noticed the box held by Nathan Zuckerman again. Yuder quickly changed the subject.

"…That box, as big as a knuckle, seemed familiar," he said.

"Ah, yes. It's the same as what I had brought from the Imperial Mage's Office before."

Nathan looked down at the box as he replied. It seemed his hunch had been correct.

'He brought the same potion as last time? Why?'

"Wasn't it something that one only needed to consume once?"

"Usually, yes…"

Nathan trailed off, furrowing his brows. He glanced around as if inspecting his surroundings, caught his breath, and then spoke in a lower voice.

"There was a warning that his heat period might coincide with the end of the cycle. So, just in case, I requested and brought an additional dosage."

‘Heat?’

The unexpected term made his heart jump momentarily. He thought he had heard wrong, but that wasn’t the case. Only after seeing Nathan’s face, which looked more serious than worried, did his startled mind begin to function properly again.

‘Right. It makes sense. I should have entered my second gender manifestation around this time, and since Kishiar’s heat coincided with this cycle before… It isn’t strange that it’s happening now.’

Some things had changed significantly in this life compared to the previous one, and some events were progressing faster, but the overall pattern hadn’t altered. Kishiar’s heat period was one of the forthcoming events.

However, the timing was inconvenient. This heat period was unexpectedly occurring during a time when Kishiar was naturally exerting his power, and the cycle time was extending. Nathan’s worry about what could happen if the two periods overlapped became understandable.

“This hasn’t happened before, right?”

“Correct. After His Grace’s awakening, there have been only two cycles. This is a first.”

“…You must be worried.”

“To be honest, yes.”

Nathan heaved a small sigh.

“And… has His Grace considered finishing this quickly in his usual way, instead of this… natural method?”

He didn’t fully understand the difference between the two methods, but it seemed better to propose a way that wouldn’t increase risks. But Nathan could only shake his head bitterly.

“Don’t you know His Grace’s personality, Sir Aile? He’s not one to waver so easily once he makes a decision.”

‘True enough.’

“His Grace claims there won’t be any major issues even if the two periods overlap, but I am not an Awakener, so I can’t say for sure. What do you think, Sir Aile? You probably know more about Awakeners’ heat period and transformative elements than I do.”

Suddenly, the direction of the question pointed towards Yuder. But even Yuder couldn’t possibly know the answer.

“I’m not entirely sure either. However, in my case, I was fine even when my second gender manifestation and heat period coincided. So, if His Grace says so, you don’t have to worry too much.”

After responding, it suddenly occurred to him that as an Omega Awakener, it might not be safe for him to keep working close to Kishiar. He swallowed his hesitation and continued.

“But if the heat period really is approaching, it would be best if I didn’t go upstairs for a while. My presence, as an Omega Awakener, might not be beneficial.”

“Is that so? His Grace has never mentioned anything of the sort…”

“Haven’t you heard about ‘scent’?”

“I have heard.”

“Then you would understand. It wouldn’t be best if Im too close.”

“I remember the Duke never being particularly affected by the scent of other Awakeners… But as you said, Sir Aile, it won’t hurt to be careful. Understood. I’ll keep that in mind and survey my surroundings a bit more.”

‘No effect? Hardly likely.’

Yuder recalled the time when Kishiar had kept his distance until the scent from his heat had completely faded. He’d even used magic to deliver items without getting too close.

‘It’s a sensitive topic, so there’s a chance he might not have disclosed it all to Nathan.’

Feeling awkward to discuss such matters, Yuder swiftly changed the subject.

“After delivering Kanna’s message, please send any other information for me in a letter, along with the rest of the Deputy Commanders.”

“I understand. I heard that Sir Aile is almost done with preparations for your trip to the West, but if you need my assistance, feel free to ask.”

As Nathan had suggested, Yuder was overseeing preparations for the Cavalry members heading west according to Kishiar’s instructions. Strictly speaking, Kishiar decided on how to divide and mobilize the Cavalry, with Yuder consulting with the Deputy Commanders to implement it. But once they set off, Yuder was likely to be the one in charge.

‘Given that Kishiar might not be able to come with us, it’ll probably end up that way.’

In his previous life, Kishiar hadn’t initially gone to the West. Instead, in his absence, Yuder and the other Deputy Commanders

had led the members on the journey.

Then, everyone was apprehensive as if being pulled towards death, but this time it would be different.

“Thank you.”

After expressing his gratitude, Yuder turned and descended.

His next agenda was to visit the new laboratory of Thais Yulman and Alik Pelgin, to check the progress of their research.

“Oh, you’re here. You’re later than usual.”

“How are the research plans going?”

“Well, so far it’s no different from yesterday.”

Thais Yulman chuckled, glancing at the black medium stacked inside the basket. He was currently searching for a way to harness the power of the Red Stone stored in the medium, which was now harmless compared to their previous dangerous influence. He was also investigating the changes that the power caused in the human body.

“Because I’m a mage, it’s a bit hard to extract the power inside. But it’s a relief that my disciple has awakened. Observations of the changes are going pretty well.”

The old mage enthusiastically discussed the notes and logs from his observations, but Yuder couldn’t understand half of it due to the complex magic terminology.

“If I could also observe your body… it could speed things up… but that seems like a no-go.”

It was obvious who was denying permission. Since Yuder had prevented a power explosion in the basement, the old mage had

repeatedly expressed his desire to research him. Yuder was also interested in understanding more about what had happened to him, and was willing to cooperate if possible, but Kishiar had not permitted it, citing unproven safety.

The old mage glanced over Yuder with a covetous look before sighing in disappointment.

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Chapter 221

“There’s nothing we can do for now. When my apprentice returns, let’s look more closely at what we’ve recently discovered. We’ve stumbled upon something quite intriguing.”

Not long after, Thais’s apprentice, Alik, appeared, his arms full of various items.

“Oh, Yuder, when did you arrive?”

“I’ve just arrived.”

“For now, set those things down and come over here, Alik.”

Upon hearing his master’s command, Alik approached, and Thais Yulman picked up one of the mediums laid out in front of him and handed it to his apprentice.

“Now, Yuder, observe closely. This is a phenomenon that Alik coincidentally discovered while he was practicing his awakened abilities, with the medium in hand.”

Upon hearing his master’s words, Alik seemed to instantly comprehend what he needed to do. Clutching the medium tightly, he began to channel energy. Yuder, watching the energy swirl around over the back of Alik’s hand like a whirlwind, narrowed his eyes and focused intently.

The energy spread like mist, and tiny droplets began to form in the air, just as they usually did. But the situation changed when a red light began to flicker from within the medium Alik was clutching.

The droplets, which were barely distinguishable from the mist, suddenly began to swell with a strange noise. In no time, they

transformed into water droplets as large as fists. In the blink of an eye, the area around the three men was filled with numerous large water droplets.

“What in the…”

“Ugh, master. I’m already straining so much…”

“Alright, you can dispel it now.”

At his master’s permission, all the water droplets vanished at once, and the red glow from within the medium faded. Alik, gasping for breath, collapsed onto a seat.

“Even though it was just a few seconds, it was really exhausting. But you saw it properly, right?”

“What exactly just happened?”

At Yuder’s question, the old mage stroked his beard with a confident smile.

“It’s absorption and amplification!”

‘Absorption and amplification?’

Asking for more explanation with his gaze, Alik started to speak.

“Do you remember when I explained the principle of magic tools?”

“Yes, I do.”

Yuder recalled the principles of magic tools he had learned from their past encounters.

‘The user’s magical power is sucked in a fixed amount, then a predefined magic is spat out.’

“This medium doesn’t contain any laws, so normally, it shouldn’t output anything. But when an Awakener’s power manifests while in contact with it, the medium immediately absorbs that power and outputs the same result with greater amplification. So, this might be evidence supporting the hypothesis that the master once proposed.”

“The hypothesis you mentioned is…”

“The hypothesis that the power of the Red Stone changes a person’s body and the more exposure, the stronger the power that might come out.”

“So, I tried to see if I could absorb that power into my body, but so far, I can only amplify and output it, I can’t absorb it from here.”

Thais Yulman added with a regretful expression.

“Alik seemed quite strained. Can’t you control the energy that is being absorbed?”

“Well… I’m not sure if it’s because I haven’t been awakened for long, but it does feel difficult.”

Alik responded, wiping his sweat.

“The sensation at the moment of amplification feels as if the medium is sucking all the power from my body.”

“Still, the more I try, the longer I can endure. At first, I couldn’t hold on for even a second, but now I’m holding on for a significant amount of time. This also lends some weight to the hypothesis.”

Listening to the explanation of Thais Yulman, who lovingly gazed at the accumulated mediums, Yuder picked up a medium and brought it close to his face to inspect. The moment the medium landed in his hand, two mages stiffened in surprise, but nothing

happened as he didn't exert any force. He ignored their reactions and quietly opened his mouth.

"So, if I grip this and exert force, will the power of the Red Stone inside diminish?"

"Ah, yes. It should. It's hard to measure, but theoretically…"

Alik began to explain, but once again the lengthy conversation filled with numbers and magic jargon made Yuder tune out.

"I'm tempted to try it myself."

"Don't do it here. If something goes wrong again, this time the Commander might seriously kick us out."

Thais Yulman had completely retracted his previously condescending gaze towards the young Duke since he was scolded by Kishiar. He realized that Kishiar's permission was crucial to continue his research.

Yet, as a persistent mage, he carefully added to Yuder,

"But it might be alright to try it once in the training ground at dawn when no one is around."

"Hmm… I'll consider it."

"Good. If you really want to try, be sure to call me."

Yuder looked down at his own hand. The spots on the inside of his gloved hand had barely hurt since he went through the second gender manifestation and the incident in the basement. It still spread a bit when he used force, but the color had faded significantly and was easily cured when he received divine power from Lusan.

Enon suggested that it might be the process of his body becoming accustomed and normalized to the power of the Red

Stone that had seeped in through his hand like poison. He thought that Enon's hypothesis and the experiments of the mages he saw today seemed to coincide in some ways, but he still couldn't be certain.

'I don't worry too much about this western dispatch mission now that my hand is fine, but I shouldn't let my guard down as the situation can change.'

Yuder resolved to test this amplifying effect at least once before heading west. Luckily, he always carried one medium with him. It seemed like the day had finally come to take a good look at the one that Kishiar had given him as a gift.

'If it's useful, I might consider bringing a few to the west.'

The thought might have shocked Thais Yulman, who lamented that Kishiar had taken away a significant amount of the produced mediums, but Yuder calmly planned his future.

"Well, I should get going now."

"You're leaving already? I wanted to show you my newly conceived water power application method…"

Alik managed to muster up some energy and stood up, looking disappointed.

"I have to prepare for a departure soon."

"Ah. You're leaving for some monster subjugation mission, right? I completely forgot even after reading the letter from the Commander! So, where are you headed?"

"I'm headed west."

"The west, hmm. Do you know exactly where you are going?"

“No, it seems I’ll be traveling to several places.”

Then, after cocking his head as if deep in thought, Thais burst into a smile and clapped his hands.

“Come to think of it, is this the Cavalry’s first monster subjugation mission?”

“Yes.”

“That must be nerve-wracking. I remember shaking in my boots when I first encountered a monster in the Pearl Tower. Not being able to use attribute magic was terrifying. But thanks to the magic tools I’d made, they proved quite useful… enough to flatten the noses of those snooty Red Wolves Tower guys…”

After going on for quite a while about his youthful exploits, Thais made a subtle proposal with a cunning smile.

“Yuder, would you mind if I wrote a letter for you?”

It turned out that the letter Thais was offering was something akin to a letter of introduction.

“I may be old, but I’ve known quite a few mages since my time as an Elder in the Pearl Tower. If you show this to Micalin, who heads the Western Mage Union, they won’t treat you badly. He’s a friend of mine.”

Yuder recalled the knights and mages from his previous life, who were perpetually hostile to the Cavalry. Their conflicts had made his mission in the West more difficult. He had braced himself for a similar struggle this time, but he hadn’t expected this letter. It was an unexpected boon.

“Thank you very much. This will be of great help to the Cavalry, on their first mission.”

Upon receiving Yuder’s unusually long thanks, Thais beamed with satisfaction.

“Of course. Always glad to help. Just make sure to tell the Commander how cooperative I was. Make sure!”

He mentioned that Micalin, the mage, was likely to be in Tainu, the home of the Tain family and also the largest city in the West. Yuder gratefully accepted the letter and left the laboratory in high spirits.

—

Yuder forced open his eyes that had been tightly shut.

Night had fallen, and everything before him was shrouded in darkness. His mouth was parched, and he craved a drink of water, but he couldn’t hope for such a luxury here. As he felt around the straw-filled bed, trying to prop himself up, a sudden hand grabbed his shoulder, forcing him back down.

“Stay lying down.”

Startled by the deep and heavy voice, he turned his head to see a familiar face. Kishiar La Orr. Even in the darkness, his golden hair and red eyes seemed to emit a faint glow. How could he not recognize them?

Yet, he hadn’t expected to see this face here.

As he blankly stared up at Kishiar, the man furrowed his brows and gave a faint smile. It was a peculiar expression, more like a forced movement due to lack of any other appropriate expression, rather than a genuine smile.

A moment later, Kishiar reached for a cup he’d kept behind him. His white gloves, normally immaculate, were stained and dirty.

Where had he gotten this cup, which clearly hadn't been there before? Yet, given his thirst, Yuder reached for the cup. However, he soon realized that he couldn't grasp the cup with his arm, which was entirely bandaged from shoulder to fingertips.

Their gazes met over his heavily bandaged arm. As he pondered what to do, Kishiar silently brought the cup to his lips.

"…"

Would it be okay?

Deciding to let whatever happens happen, he cautiously opened his mouth. The lukewarm water moistened his parched lips and trickled down his throat. After draining the cup in no time, he lowered his head to catch the last few droplets of water trickling down his chin. A slow question came.

"More?"

Yuder nodded. Kishiar offered him another cup. This time, having done it once already, it was easier to accept and drink. As he opened his mouth and swallowed, all the while keeping his head up, Kishiar's red gaze never once strayed from him.

Only after he'd emptied the third cup and the strength left his body did Kishiar, who seemed to have been waiting, open his mouth.

"They say you were mauled by a monster."

"…"

"Can you explain what happened?"

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Chapter 222

Can you explain what happened?

To be honest, he didn’t want to answer. But he had to.

Kishiar seemed prepared to stay up all night, sitting right there until Yuder spoke. It was only when the sensation of being stabbed by a sharply whetted knife reached its peak due to Yuder’s silence, that he finally moved his parched lips to speak.

It didn’t work.

Your power?

Kishiar precisely pointed out the part Yuder had left unsaid. Yuder turned his head away, avoiding his gaze.

…Yes.

Not at all?

I could use my sword. But apart from that

Kishiar said nothing. He was speechless. The man who had been so confident in the power he possessed had turned out to be the most useless piece of trash at the actual scene. Anyone would find it not just laughable but pathetic. Yuder easily recalled some of the things he had heard.

Do you even know how many got hurt just by trusting you?

This useless guy who can’t exert any power is the Deputy Commander? How can you show your face to the Cavalry now? Surely you’re not planning on sticking around?

…Coming here with such an arrogant air. Serves you right!

‘…’

As his stomach churned again, he decided to stop recalling. Rather than waiting for what might come out at the end of Kishiar’s silence, Yuder decided to speak first.

I’ll step down from the scene as soon as dawn breaks, and I’ll resign from my Deputy Commander position. I’ll accept any further punishment you decide to give me.

You’re going to give up your position and step away?

Kishiar slowly questioned back.

Why?

A voice as parched as sand ready to blow away scratched uncomfortably at Yuder’s ear. He gritted his teeth, continued avoiding Kishiar’s gaze, and mumbled.

Because over ten people were injured due to my inability to use my power. I should be rightfully punished and held accountable.

No one could have predicted your power wouldn’t work. If we’re going by that, I, who sent you, should be the one responsible and be punished.

Enough of your unacceptable words! Who would accept them just because you, the Commander, said them!

He swallowed the rough voice that had almost leaped up his throat.

…Just punish me.

What kind of punishment can I give to someone whose arms are nearly severed?

Are you asking me to tell you what kind of punishment I should get?

Yuder swallowed a sigh, eyes narrowed and closed.

Anything will do. Whip me in public or make me leave the Cavalry, please.

That would be enough to finally quell the angry voices. Gakane, who had high respect among other members, or Ever Beck, who had proved herself this time, would make a sufficient successor.

If he was to be dismissed, he would have to return to his hometown alone… But so what? It didn't seem to matter now. If he couldn't carry his belongings with his arms, he could bite them with his mouth. And perhaps this would be a better ending for the man in front of him.

He might be able to escape from this unbearable awkwardness and weird atmosphere that always arose when they were left alone. He would soon forget the dark memory of being forced to commit an unforgivable sin…

Are you serious, Yuder Aile?

Yes.

Look at me when you speak.

A chilly voice gave an order. Yuder, resisting at first, managed to drag his gaze from the floor to Kishiar. His sharp, crimson gaze was staring at him without a hint of amusement.

"I… I'm serious."

He had expected him to get angry or to spout a harsh rebuke, regardless of how weak his words might have been. But, surprisingly, Kishiar didn't get angry.

"Even if you're the first Awakener, you've only been awakened for two years."

"…"

"No one knows the extent of their abilities, or what limits exist. Even I don't fully understand the weaknesses of my power."

Yuder was suddenly at a loss for words. As he stared blankly, Kishiar spoke quietly, yet heavily.

"You're just aware of it earlier than others. Consider yourself lucky."

"What do you mean?"

"There were 11 casualties in the last battle. You're the only one who was severely injured and required a priest. I heard that once you realized your power didn't work, you held your sword and fought alone until reinforcements could arrive. Am I wrong?"

"…"

Yuder clenched his teeth again. He didn't know what to say.

"But."

"Your power didn't stop working entirely, did it? Have you tested whether it still works on other targets?"

He didn't know. After the chaotic battle, he had been too busy getting treated and finding a place to rest to test such a thing. He barely managed to borrow this barn because there were no shrines nearby.

Kishiar sighed heavily as Yuder shook his head slowly. He scooped up a handful of the straw that had been covering the floor. Just as Yuder wondered what he would do with it, Kishiar quietly gave an order.

“Light a fire here.”

“What?”

“A small fire will do.”

Yuder was skeptical about what good it could do, but he also doubted whether he could do it. As his mixed emotions left him hesitant, a soothing voice resonated in his ear.

“It’s okay, hurry.”

That’s right. What did it matter if he failed? They had already seen the worst of each other, so there was nothing more to lose.

As if guided, he gave up and exerted his power. Instantly, flames appeared out of nowhere. A small, crimson fire spread over the straw that Kishiar was holding.

As he looked at the easily created flame, Kishiar smiled softly. It was a different smile than when they first met.

“You can do it.”

He murmured as he looked down at the pile of straw that had quickly turned to ashes. Yuder was overwhelmed by strange emotions and couldn’t easily open his mouth. After a while, Kishiar, who had been looking down at the ashes on his white glove, called his name.

“Yuder Aile.”

“Yes?”

“I’ll give you a homework. If you solve it, we will forget about this incident and you will maintain your position.”

“What homework… are you talking about?”

“Find ten ways to clean up these ashes so that they are invisible.”

As he spoke, Kishiar turned over his palm. His riddle-like voice landed on the black ash piled on the floor.

“However, any direct methods that involve physical actions are to be excluded. Use only your ‘power’.”

“What do you mean…”

“This is your punishment. You don’t need anything else.”

And the moment the approaching hand covered his bewildered eyes, the engulfing darkness unfolded, and his consciousness slipped away

—

…

Once again, Yuder opened his eyes. Only after seeing the familiar ceiling of the Cavalry quarters did he realize that what just happened was a dream from his past life. Rubbing his throbbing head, he sat up, and faintly saw the still-dark window.

Unable to fall back asleep even when he closed his eyes again, he got up and drank some water. Even though it should be no different from the water he drank in his dream, it left a bitter taste in his mouth for some unknown reason.

‘I’m having some strange dreams.’

He wondered if it was because of the tension he felt, considering he was due to depart for the West soon. The vague image of Kishiar from his dream lingered in his mind.

The memories from that time remained quite vivid even now. It was a highly memorable experience, after all. It was the first time he realized that his power did not affect anything beyond what was born and grew in this world.

A few days after receiving an unfamiliar task from the belatedly arrived Kishiar, Yuder finally understood the true meaning of his words. He realized that the only way to achieve his goals was not just by burning or killing things directly as he had done before.

It didn’t matter if his direct power didn’t work against monsters. If their bodies decayed, they were bound to die. And Yuder had the power to move nature itself to crumble even the largest and toughest creatures.

Thanks to this, in the next battle, Yuder drove hundreds of monsters into a narrow valley with the help of others. He won a great victory by collapsing the entire cliff. Several landscapes in the West changed due to this, and it was deemed a historic battle that would be recorded in history books, helping him to earn the title of Count.

In this way, after a few appearances, Yuder hardly participated directly in battles due to intense check, but his experience from that day continued to be a great help even after he became a Commander.

Yuder looked down at his hand, lightly clenching and unclenching it. Because he didn’t bother to wear gloves when sleeping alone, his palm, dotted with small spots, was clearly visible. Observing the rough fingertips scarred from various jobs he had done since childhood, he suddenly remembered the bandaged hand he saw in his dream.

‘Come to think of it, that injury… It was serious, considering it now.’

He had never really thought about it before, but seeing it again in the dream, it was surprising that there were no aftereffects, given how severe the condition was. It was an injury inflicted by a monster, a natural enemy of his abilities, and until Kishiar arrived, he had only wrapped it in a bandage without receiving proper treatment. Even if it was treated later, there was a high chance of not fully recovering, yet how did it heal so cleanly?

The temples he visited afterward didn’t seem to have cured him well either. They were reluctant to use the holy water that Kishiar had procured from other regions on the Cavalry members.

‘Back then… Since it was the first injury, I just thought I recovered faster than others.’

After becoming a Commander, the injuries he received from dealing with monsters for similar reasons healed much slower than other injuries, and the scars did not fade easily.

“…”

Suddenly, Yuder stiffened his shoulders.

‘Could it be?’

He didn’t know it at the time, but there was one piece of information he had now. The fact that Kishiar could use divine power.

If his complete recovery wasn’t a coincidence, the only plausible explanation was that.

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Chapter 223

‘I cannot be certain now that I can’t even ask him directly…’

With just the suggestion of the possibility, a sudden chill ran through his mind. Yuder rubbed at the corners of his eyes and took a few deep breaths.

‘It’s pointless to think about it now. It’s all in the past…’

All in the past.

Despite the truth of his words, a deep pang of something pierced somewhere in his chest. Since turning back time and returning to the past, he had never once regretted his old life. It was the same now.

But what was this feeling, this emotion?

He was in turmoil, not knowing how to describe the sensation he was currently experiencing.

Despite repeating to himself numerous times and trying to clear his mind as he sat back down on the bed, sleep eluded him. Instead of drowsiness, his mind was filled with thoughts of Kishiar, not the upcoming Western subjugation mission or thoughts about the Red Stone.

The enigmatic man whose secret he thought he’d never understand until the day he died.

The first human whose life he had taken with his own hands.

And the face he had recalled in that final moment, despite suppressing it for such a long time.

‘…Maybe I should ask Enon.’

He had always considered the irregular dreams, whose reality he could not ascertain, as just thatdreams. But this time it was hard to pass off. Since Enon knew so much, wouldn’t he be able to point out something Yuder missed upon hearing this story?

His face might flare up, saying, “You think I know everything?” but he had no choice. Enon was the only one who knew the story of him coming back from the future.

‘It’s late, but Enon usually doesn’t sleep much, so he might still be awake.’

Deciding to check if the light was on in his room, right next to the medical division, and if not, to come back, he felt lighter.

However, as Yuder, who silently opened the door and stepped into the dark corridor illuminated by the moonlight, stopped in his tracks before he could take a few steps. He sensed something before he even turned his eyes.

A presence stimulating his senses beyond his five senses.

“…Commander?”

Responding to the faint call, the man who was leaning against the corridor wall slowly opened and closed his eyes. A faint smile adorned his face hidden in the darkness, his red pupils shining darkly.

“Out for a night walk?”

“Why… are you here?”

“…”

He asked, concealing his surprise, but Kishiar didn’t answer. Seeing his face quietly staring at him as if it was his turn to ask, he felt the dream memories he had barely suppressed beginning to surge up. Yuder tried his best not to recall them and opened his mouth.

“…I was about to head down to the medical division.”

“Why?”

“I couldn’t sleep, so I thought I might talk to Enon if he was still awake……”

It sounded a bit awkward, but it wasn’t entirely a lie.

“So, you were going to talk to him without even knowing if he was awake?”

“If he wasn’t awake, I was just going to come back.”

“Then isn’t there a better choice than the uncertain one?”

Right in front of him. As he mumbled, his pale face left Yuder speechless. Struggling to find a response, Yuder licked his lips, and finally let out a sigh.

“Why are you here, really? Surely you didn’t come to see me.”

“Why do you say that with such certainty?”

“…So, you’re saying you really came to see me?”

At this late hour, without even knocking on the door, simply standing in the corridor?

Facing Yuder’s gaze, full of complex suspicion, Kishiar faintly smiled. His face appeared more languid and dreamy than usual, as if half-drowned in sleep.

“To be honest, I’m not sure myself. After hearing Nathan’s report, it seemed I was just resting alone, and when I came to, I was here.”

“Is that so…”

Could it be sleepwalking? Or perhaps a sign of health issues due to his cycle? Either way, moving unconsciously wasn’t a good sign.

“Should I call Priest Lusan?”

“It’s okay.”

Kishiar, who responded lightly, removed himself from leaning against the wall and approached.

“Just, would you like to chat?”

Even if it’s just a little. The end of the sentence was in such a small voice that it was uncertain whether it had been properly heard. As the distance lessened, he could distinctly feel an immense flow enveloping and moving Kishiar, unlike anything before. Being near Kishiar felt like floating in a very deep, black sea - a heavy, smooth sensation that pressed on the skin. It wasn’t a painful sensation, but it made Yuder feel somewhat choked, so he unknowingly loosened the collar of his shirt a bit.

Immediately, Kishiar halted his steps and his gaze followed the movement.

“Are you uncomfortable?”

“…No.”

Yuder alternated glances between his closed room door and Kishiar.

‘Meeting Enon is out of the question.’

He had been worried about him not showing his face properly for several days, but he hadn’t hoped to encounter him this way. Let alone in a situation where dreams of the past muddled his mind, what conversation was he to have with the person involved?

A proper assistant would have advised him to go rest considering his poor health.

‘But…’

Nevertheless, Yuder felt a deep regret for his difficulty in telling Kishiar to leave immediately.

‘Even though Nathan told me that the cycle and heat might overlap, I can’t smell anything yet… Considering what could happen if he goes out in that state, it’s better to invite him in for a while.’

Once again, after a deep sigh, Yuder reopened the door he had shut.

Was this a choice he wouldn’t regret? He couldn’t know.

“Would you like to come in for a while, perhaps have some tea?”

Kishiar, who had been standing in the corridor since his arrival, widened his eyes a little, perhaps not expecting an invitation. After a moment, he gently smiled and slid his foot into the open door.

“Sure.”

Although the room wasn’t large, being suitable for a single person, it didn’t feel cramped. However, strangely, once Kishiar entered, it felt as though the room was suddenly full. Watching the man unfamiliarly looking around the new space, Yuder cleared the water glass on the table and lit the lamp.

“Please, take a seat.”

After roughly sprinkling the tea leaves that Kanna had once forced onto the two tea cups, a small movement of his finger formed two droplets of water in the air. The droplets divided into two streams, filling each cup. With another flick of his hand, the tea heated to a suitable temperature, steaming in the cups. Looking down at the steamy tea cup, Yuder lightly pushed one toward Kishiar.

“Wait until the aroma comes out before you drink.”

“You are remarkably efficient in brewing tea. Nathan would be disappointed if he saw this.”

“If you have the skill, why not use it?”

Kishiar chuckled lightly at the firm reply.

“I’ve never had tea made with power before, so I’m looking forward to the taste.”

The elegant man seated across reached out and picked up the cup. Despite its humble appearance, it transformed into something incredibly valuable and precious once held in his grasp. Why, indeed?

Yuder took the opportunity to speak as the man took in the aroma of the tea.

“Do you feel a bit better now?”

“If you’re asking if I feel normal, then no.”

The answer was as he expected, not particularly surprising.

“However, my mood is much better now that we’re sitting across from each other.”

“Do you really not remember how you ended up here?”

“That’s correct.”

“Do you have any suspicions?”

“Suspicions, you say…”

Kishiar, muttering under his breath, took a sip of his tea and fell silent, seemingly lost in thought as he gazed at the flickering lamp light.

“Ah, yes, I remember now.”

Just when it seemed that he had remembered something, Kishiar set down his cup and spoke in a soft tone.

“You came to my room earlier today, didn’t you?”

Yuder, trying to hide his surprise, almost dropped his own cup. He quickly regained his composure to prevent the trembling cup from spilling over, but it was already too late. Kishiar was watching, a small smile on his narrowed eyes.

“…Did you know?”

“I could feel it from inside.”

Yuder recalled Nathan saying how Kishiar could sense the movements of others even when seated quietly. He felt a slight pang of defeat.

‘Knowing who the opponent is, why did the impulse surge then…’

“Why did you come and then just leave?”

“It was nothing.”

“I might have believed that if someone else said it.”

Kishiar replied softly, his chin propped in his hand and his head slightly tilted. The small movement made the distance between them feel much closer due to the small table separating them.

“I can’t believe it because it’s Yuder Aile.”

“Even if you can’t believe it, it was truly nothing. What should I say in response?”

“Fine, let’s change the subject. I don’t want to believe it.”

Despite the firm denial, Kishiar quickly changed the subject, letting out a laugh at Yuder’s sour expression.

“To be honest, I was waiting for you to come in. I was really looking forward to the sound of knocking on the door. I swear.”

“…”

Was the feeling of the pressure on his skin intensifying due to the aura Kishiar was emanating, or was it just his imagination? It could have been both.

“But then you turned around and left, and Nathan came and told me to correspond through letters for a while, wasn’t that it?”

“That was…”

“I understand it’s because of the heat period.”

Kishiar cut in, exhaling a sigh.

“But sometimes, that’s what makes it more bitter.”

“So, is that why you came here?”

“Um… That wasn’t really the intention. But the last thing I remember was thinking about it before closing my eyes.”

His fingers, which had been circling the rim of his cup, came to a stop. His red gaze fell onto the lightly rippling surface of the tea.

“I thought perhaps if you tell me you were worried about me and that’s why you wanted to come in, maybe this cold could also be dispelled.”

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Chapter 224

The whisper was as cold and barren as the darkness trying to swallow the dim light of the lantern. Yuder read unfamiliar emotions within that voice, feelings he hadn't expected Kishiar to reveal. The inside of his throat felt numbing and he felt queasy, like riding a rough wave.

What could this possibly be?

This was different from the intense impulse of the moment their lips met, and from the burning attraction that had spread like wildfire.

There was no coercion, no commands, but strangely enough, the gate of his heart was easily swayed. He wanted to honestly admit his urge to check if Kishiar was in the room. However, he also worried about what might happen afterward.

Was this what it felt like to be thrown at a crossroads where nothing ahead could be seen? Lately, when standing in front of Kishiar, he often found himself caught up in such restlessness. Had he ever felt this much hesitation about what he intended to do? Yuder looked down, feeling like an explorer standing at the last moment before a point of no return. Kishiar's hand, still on the glass, caught his eye.

Unlike his dreams, that large hand, not wrapped in a glove, was the strongest proof that the past and the present were different.

The clearest of the leftover pen marks in the middle of the finger must be because he was working almost until he arrived here. An image of Kishiar working in the bedroom flitted across Yuder's mind.

Seeing him lying in bed when he wasn't well before, it wasn't hard to imagine him lying down working. Had he been like that all

day today as well? Listening for any noise outside the door, quietly, and alone.

‘It all leads to the same conclusion, no matter what I think.’

Just when he was about to avert his gaze in disbelief, he suddenly noticed something red inside Kishiar’s sleeve. It was a fleeting glimpse that could be dismissed as a misperception, but Yuder’s eyes, well-versed in wounds and death, instinctively discerned its nature.

‘A scar?’

All the complex thoughts that had occupied his mind until a moment ago vanished, leaving him blinking in surprise. Before he knew it, he had acted on impulse. Next thing he realized, he was lifting Kishiar’s sleeve, holding the cuff in his hand.

“Commander, what is this”

Sure enough, it wasn’t a misconception. The thin, red mark revealed inside the sleeve was undoubtedly the trace of a healed wound. Even with divine power healing, deep wounds tend to leave a reddish mark for some time, and Kishiar’s mark precisely matched that. It was a mark he had seen so many times in his past life that he knew it even if he didn’t want to. His hand on the scar felt numb, possibly due to the intense shock and anger.

“What is this? Who did this?”

“There’s no need to worry.”

Casually, Kishiar pulled his arm away from Yuder’s grasp. The scar vanished back under the sleeve.

“So, are you not going to answer me in the end?”

“Is the answer important right now?”

“It is important, of course.”

His casual response was stupefying, but Yuder chose his words as calmly as possible.

“First, tell me who did this. Where and what did you do to leave such a deep wound? Who healed”

Kishiar sighed.

“Who else.”

“Excuse me?”

“I inflicted it myself. And I healed it myself. So, calm down.”

Kishiar had personally inflicted and healed the wound? Was that true?

But why?

Yuder was speechless for a long time before he finally managed to move his lips.

“Why…”

“Because it’s the most effective way to temporarily drain a large amount of energy from a human body. But of course, it does seem a bit extreme.”

The response was so cold, it didn’t feel like he was talking about his own body. It took several blinks for Yuder to understand that what he had just heard was related to the energy release cycle. Suddenly, a feeling of being choked hit him.

“You said you were drawing it out naturally. Is this your idea of natural?”

“…”

“Isn’t it?”

Kishiar did not reply. Of course, it wasn’t. Self-harm couldn’t possibly be a natural method. So, had he always used this method to cycle his energy? Did Nathan Zuckerman know about this? Had he done the same in his past life?

‘No, that can’t be.’

No matter how Kishiar had transferred his energy before, Yuder instinctively knew this was not it. He might not know all about Nathan Zuckerman’s nature, but he was sure Nathan wouldn’t nonchalantly accept a method that hurt his lord. But then, why had Kishiar abruptly abandoned his original method and chosen to rip his arm?

Was there a reason that compelled him to?

His head started spinning. Looking at the speechless Yuder, Kishiar lifted the corners of his mouth in a troubled expression.

“It seems like you’re quite shocked.”

This was no time for a simple expression of surprise. It was enough to completely awaken him from what little sleep he had left.

“Does Zuckerman know?”

“Nathan doesn’t. He’d be surprised, so let’s keep it a secret.”

“Have you been doing this since the start of this cycle?”

“No. Didn’t I say this was a temporary method?”

Despite his denial, Yuder found it hard to believe him. He decided to consult with Nathan Zuckerman as soon as dawn broke.

The pale, bloodless face he had seen in the corridor wasn't just because of the night. His comment about the chill subsiding wasn't a mere metaphor either. Naturally, when blood leaves the body, one feels colder.

Mixed feelings of astonishment and directionless, intense emotions came over him.

'Didn't he say he values his body more than I do mine?'

Why would someone who is different from ordinary people in every way do such a thing?

Staring once again at Kishiar, Yuder suddenly felt as if he had found an answer in those watchful eyes. It was an implausible answer from a logical perspective, but for some reason, in this emotionally charged moment, it made sense.

'Could it be.'

"…Is it because of me?"

"…"

Again, there was no response. But unlike his smiling lips, his eyebrows softened slightly.

His absurd speculation shattered all at once. He saw his own face, mouth agape and speechless, faintly reflected in Kishiar's eyes.

'Did he tear his arm to come to me? Really?'

Something within him felt like it was being pushed off a cliff and tumbling down. Whatever had started rolling inside him, he knew he

couldn’t stop it with his own power.

“I’m sorry. When I said I couldn’t remember anything on my way here, that was a lie.”

Kishiar muttered, unsure what Yuder made of his silence.

“But I really wanted to see you. The thought that if not now, I couldn’t ask, was too intense to bear. But my condition was too unstable to go outside”

Behind the whisper that he had no choice but to rip his arm, it seemed as if countless words were echoing.

Why he had come to my bedroom door today.

If he had been thinking of me.

If he knew I was waiting.

””

“Are you disappointed? That I lack the restraint you have.”

The lamplight flickered over a peculiar smile. The swaying light, due to an indiscernible sigh, made Kishiar’s smile seem like a warped portrait. Something that had been tumbling inside Yuder reached a point of no return upon seeing that smile.

Remembering a dream of a day in a past life when Kishiar had said similar words, Yuder closed his eyes.

“I’m not particularly strong in restraint, either.”

“People would be angry if they heard that.”

“If I had such strong restraint, I would not have impulsively made my way to you, knowing where you were and what you were doing.”

The gaze that fell upon his face was scorching. It was a straining feeling, but Yuder struggled to finish his final words.

“I was really impulsive. But then, I wanted to confirm something so badly that I couldn’t resist.”

Just like when he had torn his arm and stood in front of Yuder’s room, unable to do anything.

In saying that he had come because he felt it had to be done then, he was no different from Yuder. Thinking this, a faint smile slipped out. He had considered them different in every way, but looking at it this way, they might have been quite similar.

‘It makes sense that our behavior would be similar, considering I learned everything from Kishiar to become a Commander’

“What was it?”

Kishiar asked what he had wanted to confirm.

Exhaling a sigh, Yuder looked straight at him.

“I wanted to confirm if you were really there.”

That was it. Nothing more, nothing less. It was the simple truth.

After uttering it, the statement seemed too concise, feeling almost meaningless, and that left a sense of emptiness. However, it appeared the listener did not feel the same.

Gradually, the shadow lifted from the face of the silent Kishiar, and a smile brighter than the light blossomed.

“We were the same.”

He whispered.

“Both of us were the same, weren’t we?”

“Yes”

Whether he heard the small response properly or not, the brighter smile illuminated the room.

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Chapter 225

Yuder momentarily forgot everything at the sight of that smiling face. The fact that this was his untidy quarters, and the realization that the coming dawn would bring a day busier than most, all disappeared from his mind.

He stood dazed, merely staring ahead when Kishiar reached out slowly, their gazes locked. He guessed he wanted to touch his cheek, but he halted at a certain distance, trembling slightly, unable to move any closer.

Her hesitant fingertips twitched a few times, only to stop again.

“Commander?”

When he asked him, implying why he was behaving in such a manner, Kishiar muttered slowly,

“I am so tempted to just let my hand reach you.”

After closing his eyes briefly as if suppressing a powerful emotion, he continued,

“…But I can’t. I’m too happy. I’m afraid I’ll hurt you if I can’t control my strength.”

His expression mirrored the one he wore when he teased him in the Comander’s office about how far he could touch him, only to avoid his response. Surely, he wouldn’t need to restrain himself that much just to touch his cheek. Yuder, looking down at his own hand on his knee, cautiously spoke up.

“I’m not so fragile as to get hurt from that.”

“I know that. But wouldn’t you be repulsed if I accidentally released the energy of an Alpha Awakener?”

“Well…”

It was an answer he hadn’t expected. Yuder blinked for a moment, then furrowed his brow.

It seemed Kishiar thought he feared or at least disliked Alpha Awakeners, considering the incident he had experienced during his second gender manifestation. That past incident was tied to his efforts to prevent a recurrence of old memories, but Yuder couldn’t explain that, so he remained silent.

He wanted to say that then and now were different, but he didn’t know exactly how to put it. He felt like a fool.

“I’m not… I don’t dislike Alpha Awakeners. It was just… back then…”

When he fell silent, Kishiar let out a faint smile.

“You’re quite affectionate, my assistant.”

Affectionate. That was a compliment he never thought he’d hear in his lifetime. He wouldn’t have been as surprised if he’d been ambushed. Yuder was bewildered, unsure whether to lower his head or not, when Kishiar suddenly started another topic.

“Do you know the easiest way to identify a broken imperial family member?”

“I don’t.”

“When they can’t control their energy and it leaks out, it can hurt those around them. Something as small as a glass in their hand

could shatter, or a living creature that touches them could suddenly die.”

Kishiar murmured casually, looking down at his own fingertips.

“In my case, a horse’s leg that I touched broke.”

A chill ran down his spine.

“It was a creature I cherished, a gift for my birthday, but it couldn’t withstand that incident and died.”

””

“Nathan almost died several times being at my side. Not from battling like a knight, but simply because his master couldn’t control his power.”

Her tone was gentle yet self-mocking.

“I still think about those times, even now. Even knowing there’s no need to worry, I find myself having such weak thoughts.”

Perhaps its because this is a period of erratic energy, his gaze turned toward Yuder’s face as he mumbled. Suddenly, a smile graced his lips.

“Recently, whenever I saw my adorable assistant, such thoughts occurred to me. Perhaps I had grown too fond of him. If I were to hesitate further, it would only grow, never lessen.”

Despite the blatant tease, he found himself at a loss for words, perhaps because of the nature of the content.

“But when this tiresome period passes, then…”

Though joy was visible in his eyes, the seemingly cold expression on his face returned. Watching him, Yuder reached out impulsively,

ignoring Kishiar’s mumbling. The moment his hand unexpectedly touched Kishiar’s pale cheek, Kishiar stopped speaking, as if he had been struck by lightning.

“Nothing’s wrong, is it?”

Fortunately, a steady voice, albeit awkward, flowed out.

“I believe you’re capable of handling this much. Even if you’ve become sensitive due to the cycle, over-worrying can be harmful, so please refrain.”

Only then did Kishiar glance at the hand touching his left cheek. The sensation of strength entering his cold cheek felt oddly comforting.

‘If someone saw this, they’d arrest me on the spot for an outrageous blasphemy.’

The audacity of touching an imperial family member first. Had any commoner ever dared such an act in the history of the empire? Feeling the sweat pool in his palm, he contemplated whether he should withdraw his hand, just as Kishiar gave a barely perceptible smirk, closing his eyes.

Moments later, a cool warmth enveloped Yuder’s hand. Kishiar, who had placed his hand atop Yuder’s, tilting his head slightly, tightened his grip on Yuder’s hand.

It was as though a giant beast was nuzzling its head into his hand. Before he could respond, a faint voice came to his ears.

“You’re right.”

””

“Nothing really happens.”

“Yes, nothing happens at this level.”

Kishiar laughed. Simultaneously, warmth flooded his previously cold cheek. It was as if he could feel the sculpture of his life turn into a living person through his hand. Maybe this was that feeling.

“It’s been so long”

With each murmur akin to a sigh, he could feel the movement of Kishiar’s lips beneath his palm.

“It’s much warmer than I imagined.”

As Kishiar slowly moved his head, his lips got closer to Yuder’s hand. He thought about pulling away, but the firm grip on his hand didn’t weaken. Finally, Kishiar, with his lips completely against Yuder’s hand, closed his eyes and breathed out.

It was a thin breath, as if a bird had finally found a place to breathe.

“Commander.”

“Just a bit more.”

As soon as he spoke, Kishiar’s lips moved within the tight grip. When Yuder’s fingers twitched at the ticklish sensation, he could feel everything, even the contours drawn by the moving lips.

“Sigh”

Only after a considerable time, when his hand had started to numb, did Kishiar release his lips and reluctantly let go of his hand, sighing like a tired beast. The lips, visible even in the darkness, were noticeably flushed compared to before. The sight was unexpectedly provocative, making Yuder instinctively avert his gaze. A faint laughter echoed in his ears.

“It’s time to get up.”

Yuder, who was about to ask if he was leaving already, was startled to see that the darkness outside the window had significantly lightened. They hadn’t exchanged many words, yet he was taken aback by how much time had passed.

“If we linger much longer… Nathan will realize my absence.”

“As soon as you go back, get some rest, even if it’s brief.”

“I have something to say.”

His face, murmuring apologies for stealing sleep time, relaxed even more than before. It seemed that the tension he had been suppressing since their hands touched had finally eased.

“I’ll open the door for you.”

“It’s fine. You don’t need to follow me out…”

As he was speaking, Kishiar, who was first to rise, suddenly swayed and steadied himself on the table. The sound of tea cups clashing echoed through the room.

“Commander?”

Worried something was wrong with him, he jumped up in surprise, only to see Kishiar, head lowered and holding his brow.

“…It’s nothing. Just a sudden wave of sleepiness.”

“Sleepiness, you say. Haven’t you slept?”

“Well… I haven’t really slept much lately.”

He was about to ask if he had been having trouble sleeping when Kishiar, trying to take a step, wavered again. he sprang up quickly to

support him.

“Don’t… even though I said its fine…”

He forced down his hand that was trying to push him away and put his arm around his shoulder. Given his much taller height compared to his, even this was a little challenging.

“We’re okay now. I’ll move you to the Commander’s room. Please hang on a bit longer.”

But before they could even take a few steps, Kishiar’s knees gave out entirely. He couldn’t hold up his weight and they both fell down.

‘…Ugh.’

Fortunately, his instinctive use of wind magic cushioned their fall and prevented any injury. He swiftly got up and checked on Kishiar first.

His closed eyes, the still warm cheeks, his firm body… nothing seemed out of the ordinary as he checked him over. His regular, rhythmic breathing suggested he was simply asleep, not ill.

‘…Even if he hadn’t slept well lately, to suddenly fall asleep like this.’

He had been acting fine, but clearly, something wasn’t right. He sighed heavily as he looked down at him. He could use his wind magic to move him, but the problem was that dawn was approaching. How could he be certain no one was already up and preparing to go out for their dawn training? If anyone saw him moving the collapsed Commander from his room, he didn’t know what would happen.

‘I should move him to my bed for now and report this to Nathan in the morning.’

He waved his hand, summoning a gust of wind, and gently lifted Kishiar’s body onto his bed. After taking off his indoor shoes and covering him with a blanket, he found the sight of him laying there somewhat disconcerting.

‘Kishiar La Orr is sleeping in my bed…’

It was an absurdly novel and unfamiliar sight. Not once in his previous life, nor in this one, had he ever seen him in such a vulnerable state.

‘Now that’s settled, but his legs are so long they hang off the bed… What should I do?’

He hadn’t expected to worry about bending his long legs which hung off the bed. Feeling awkward with this unfamiliar problem, he tentatively put his hand on his leg, and suddenly felt as guilty as a criminal.

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Chapter 226

Just leave it.

Having finally withdrawn from the task more arduous than cupping a cheek - attending to the stiff legs, Yuder slumped into the chair where Kishiar had been seated, massaging his weary shoulders. From his position, he had a clear view of the face of the man lying on the bed.

The sleeping Kishiar looked surprisingly peaceful, much more than Yuder had expected. His breath was so faint, it was barely audible. Looking down at Kishiar, who lay motionless without a single toss or turn, Yuder felt his feelings start to settle.

… Isn’t he sleeping too much like a corpse?

Corpse. At the unbidden thought of the word, a long-buried memory suddenly surfaced. The funeral scene of Duke Peletta that took place before the first winter had passed after he became the Cavalry Commander. Even though it was the funeral of the last imperial bloodline, it was quite desolate in front of the casket.

Did the face in the coffin look like this when he silently laid a flower and turned away amid the hostile gazes and murmurings that were pecking and poking him all over?

“…”

Yuder clenched his fists, which were placed on his knees, and drove away his idle thoughts.

Am I daydreaming about my past life too much?

Each time he was faced with Kishiar, and was tempted to kneel to his burning urge, memories and emotions of the past would suddenly spring forth as a backlash. Time had been turned back, but the memories remained unchanged. It was only natural, but the weight of the secret that hadn't been too uncomfortable at first felt increasingly heavy day by day.

Each time Kishiar revealed a bit more of his inner thoughts, Yuder was made painfully aware of the weight of his own hidden memories. Who would have thought that he, who had wanted to know Kishiar's secrets in his previous life, would now be in the opposite situation.

But the difference was clear, even though they found themselves in similar situations. The Yuder of that time had cried out for Kishiar to reveal the truth, but the present Kishiar was silently showing his innermost feelings without asking anything of Yuder, drawing him in.

While he was fine now, he wondered where this growing urge would lead him. Most of the changes from his previous life had been welcomed, but his relationship with Kishiar always felt different.

As he unclenched his hand, the nail marks were clear. Yuder looked down at them, then brought his hand up to his lips, pressing it against the inside of his palm. Unlike when Kishiar's lips had touched, this time it felt no warmth.

Releasing a sigh of disappointment at the foolish action, he noticed the rising sun beyond the window. Avoiding the sunlight, which he would usually have been happy to bask in, he rose to draw the curtains, Yuder thought of one thing.

I have already crossed the crossroads.

Regardless of what he thought, he was now too far along to turn back.

The memory of kissing him still surfaced from time to time, as would the heat of his palm that had touched his lips today, and the sensation of embracing a collapsing body with no strength. He would never forget them.

So, in the end, there was only one thing left.

The situation has changed a lot from the initial expectation, but I still have to protect Kishiar. Just think about that.

Yuder was about to sit back down in the chair, but he paused, looking down at Kishiar.

The energy that Kishiar had been wrapping around his body while he was awake seemed to have also fallen asleep, and the surroundings were much quieter than when he was forcibly suppressing it. Still, if he concentrated, he could feel a heavy energy slowly radiating into the air.

‘The vessel’

Within Kishiar, four distinct powers coexisted - Sword Aura, Magic Power, Divine Power, and the Awakener’s Power. His existence could almost be considered a blessing in itself, yet it was a heartbreaking irony that he suffered for so many years, precisely due to the overwhelming nature of his powers.

‘If only I could visually perceive this vessel, or feel it more tangibly’

Mages were said to have ways of knowing how much magic power they had accumulated. Swordsmen, too, at the Swordmaster level, could roughly gauge how much aura they had built up over time. Priests, in particular, were quite adept at quantifying the amount of divine power they possessed.

Out of the four powers, determining the amount of power held by an Awakener was the most challenging. Still, those like Yuder, who had used these powers for a long time and had become sensitive to their flow, could gauge it to some extent. This was in the same vein as being able to visually perceive the flow of power when focused.

The power of an Awakener typically gathered below the navel, where the upper and lower body divided. Some individuals accumulated it elsewhere, but from what Yuder had observed in his past life, this was the general pattern.

'…There may be much I can't do in regards to other powers, but at least the power of an Awakener'

Maybe it wouldn't hurt to confirm how much of it was present. Considering his state of heightened sensitivity, he might be able to sense the power enveloping him without too much struggle.

With his hand extended, he hesitated momentarily before it landed on the blanket. He then gently lifted the thin veil to gaze at the area around his belly underneath the revealed skin.

He thought that lifting his clothes would make it clearer, but he wanted to avoid any misunderstanding if he woke up.

'After all, I'm trying to discern it through the flow, so there's no need for that.'

With that thought, he placed his hand on his belly, concentrated his vision, and gave it his all.

Suddenly, he felt a tremendous pressure from beneath his hand.

'Huh?'

Without a chance to brace himself, a robust energy from within Kishiar, as if repelling an intruder, burst out with a 'whoosh' and

shoved Yuder’s hand away. At the same time, a red light emanated from the heated back of his hand.

Light, bursting along the faded purple spots that had been recently thinning, fiercely contested with the energy flowing out of Kishiar.

‘…What is this?’

Even when he swiftly withdrew his hand, the light didn’t stop flowing. Yuder was caught in a peculiar sensation, somewhat similar to the incident with the Red Stone in the basement, where he felt as though he could touch and manipulate the energies present in this space.

“Ugh!”

Groaning as the energy was rapidly drained, he stretched his hand towards Kishiar’s body again with great difficulty. The energy radiated once more, causing his body to jolt. Thinking that Kishiar had awoken, he quickly turned his head, but Kishiar’s eyes were still closed.

‘This is’

Slowly bending his fingers, Yuder tightly grasped a part of the energy surrounding Kishiar. Although he could not feel anything physically, the sense of ‘holding onto something’ registered in his mind.

He held onto the energy tightly to prevent it from escaping. After what felt like an eternity, the energetic trembling within his hand gradually calmed down. The energy surrounding Kishiar’s body simultaneously weakened and then, abruptly, Yuder began to see unfamiliar landscapes that were starkly different from before.

Yuder saw the differing hues and textures of energies swirling above Kishiar's entire body. It was like watching a moving painting. Though he had never seen or learned about them before, he strangely felt an immediate clarity about their identities.

White divine energy wrapped around his head, the wind-like blue aura concentrated in both hands, golden magic power emanating from the heart like branching blood vessels, and the solid red power enveloping his body from the navel downward.

The latter red energy was, he was certain, the Awakened power that Kishiar possessed.

'I hoped to see it, but who would have thought I'd see it this way.'

The shock was so great it rendered his mind momentarily blank, but he could not afford to stop here. Yuder mustered the waning red energy and focused his mind. The four energies, coursing around his body, seemed to maintain a semblance of balance. However, they tangled and knotted where they met, preventing a smooth flow. The most significant entanglement was near his middle, close to the vital point.

Seeing the fist-sized lump pulsating as though it was a second heart, Yuder unwittingly held his breath.

'…What in the world is that?'

When he focused harder, it looked like the root from where all the energies started. They flowed out and returned to this knotted root, defining and merging their boundaries repeatedly.

Aside from the fact that energy flowed instead of blood, it indeed appeared to be a second heart.

The outermost layer of the lump was, once again, the red energy. Its strong presence maintained the form as though it wrapped and

protected everything within.

‘…Could that be the vessel?’

The sensation was incredibly intense and overwhelming, yet it also made him exceedingly anxious. Watching the flow of energies swirling around Kishiar’s body, Yuder tentatively reached out to touch the nearest tangled bundle. He wanted to confirm if he could physically feel them.

The moment the red-tinged fingertips touched the entangled energy, the knotted portion twitched and recoiled with a sensation akin to sparking fire.

And Kishiar also seemed to feel pain at the same spot, his eyelids flickering and brows furrowing.

Grinding his teeth against the pain in his hand, Yuder bore it for a moment before releasing his breath.

‘…It hurts similarly to when the spots were inflamed.’

Still, it was bearable for now. Looking down at his hand, enwrapped in the red glow, he couldn’t determine if the spots had spread.

After taking a deep breath, he reached out once again, this time towards the navel where most of the red energy was concentrated. The Awakened energy, glowing the same hue as that enshrouding his hand, softly rippled as if welcoming him.

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Chapter 227

The power of an Awakener, as radiant as the light that wrapped around Yuder's hand, gently rippled as if welcoming him.

'Maybe this side is a bit easier to handle.'

However, contrary to his thoughts, the power of an Awakener was not that easy to control. It didnt react or inflict pain when he tried to manipulate it like he did with other powers. Yet, the power merely twined around Yuder's hand as if trying to cling to it, only to return to its original place, repeating this cycle. It was uncanny how it seemed intent on touching of its own volition, yet always slipped away, as if mocking its own master.

'Do powers also take after their master?'

Regardless of the numerous attempts, the outcome was always a failure.

'The remaining three powers are too resistant, and the power of an Awakener is hard to grasp…'

He wondered if he should just give up for now. He didnt want to rashly tamper with it and risk causing more harm. But there was no guarantee that this fortuitous opportunity would present itself again. If this was a once-in-a-lifetime chance, he knew he would undoubtedly regret not seizing it. Looking at the red aura that encased his hand, Yuder gritted his teeth.

'I must at least try to touch the power.'

Fortunately, Kishiar had not yet woken up. Even though he felt his energy draining faster than when he summoned the fiery pillar

that seemed to pierce the sky, he could still endure. With his other hand, Yuder wiped the sweat accumulating on his forehead.

‘Instead of blindly trying to touch it, I should carefully observe it first.’

He took a deep breath to calm his rushing thoughts and focused. With a splitting headache, he started to see the flow of the aura wrapping around Kishiar’s body more clearly.

‘The problem is definitely those tangled lumps, regardless of how you look at it…’

Ideally, each power should flow in its own place like blood circulating in the body. The current situation, where powers were tangled together, blocking their paths, couldnt possibly be good for the body. The flow of power was very slow now, possibly due to Kishiar’s sleeping state. If the flow sped up, the collisions and tangles would undoubtedly worsen.

‘The expression “a crack in the vessel” must refer to the situation where the power lump, which seems like a vital point, gets stressed and causes a problem.’

With this understanding, he could also see why Kishiar mentioned a ‘cycle’ as necessary. If the four powers inside his body failed to maintain a proper balance and one of them inflated too much, or all of them swelled and blocked the flow, the number of those tangled lumps would increase correspondingly.

If such problems escalated, it would inevitably lead to a breakdown. Therefore, it was necessary to extract some of the accumulated power before it expanded too much.

‘…Its probably better to let it out before it gets too congested and bursts.’

Kishiar mentioned that the imperial family members who broke their vessels died as their bodies exploded. No matter how strong a being was, they could not defend against an attack from within.

‘But in the end, it wasn’t a fundamental solution.’

Considering the issue originated from having multiple powers, which most humans found challenging to possess even one, finding a solution was difficult. Frankly, even Yuder, who was observing these enormous powers clearly through his eyes, had no clue where to start.

Yuder felt a shiver down his spine thinking that if it weren’t for the power of the Awakener one, which was solidly wrapped around the other three remaining energies from the outside like a fence, Kishiar might have already died from his body exploding. When he had heard the tale of the imperial family member dying from an exploded body, he’d only vaguely imagined it as a dreadful scene. Now, however, seeing the flow of energy firsthand, he could easily envision how such a calamity might occur.

Unconsciously, Yuder shook his chilling head, grinding his teeth.

‘At least, Kishiar is safe from such a death now.’

But recalling once again that Kishiar had ripped open his own arm to extract blood and power before coming here, Yuder’s emotions were somewhat complicated.

He wiped the sweat emerging from his temple once more and then tensed his hand. Of all the energies flowing within Kishiar, he moved his arm towards the smallest tangled part which was closest to where the power of the Awakener one was gathered.

Just like the last time when he thought that he must control the power of the Red Stone, which might collapse the basement, he focused all his strength to grasp this energy.

‘Just like before… Just one more time!’

An intense pressure that felt like it could break his bones rushed in, making his fingers tremble uncontrollably. Although his lungs felt like they would burst due to his heavy breathing and he was in agony, Yuder, in his intensely concentrated state, didn’t feel a thing.

‘I can grab it.’

The power of the Awakener that was wrapped around the tangled energies. He had to seize it.

Heat rose above his wide-open eyes. His body was shaking violently. An energy akin to smoke seemed to bloom, dyeing the inside of Yuder’s eyes a red hue, but he himself was unaware of it.

And finally, when he felt something catch onto his fingertips with a thunk.

Yuder seized it without missing a beat. A red energy glowed intensely within his trembling hand.

‘I’ve got it!’

He’d grasped the ‘power’ of the Awakener flowing within Kishiar.

Yuder gripped something invisible trying to escape from his hand, inhaling sharply. The energy of Kishiar in his hand flickered, transmitting a strange sensation he’d never felt before. It felt like forcibly holding onto something too massive to be held in his grasp. His fingers were throbbing as if they might explode and it was hot, but he didn’t loosen his clenched fist. It was the same as when he had grasped the power of the Red Stone in the basement. At this moment, he was connected to the power through his hand.

‘As for Kishiar…’

After he seized the energy, he instinctively turned his gaze to the man who was still asleep, as if nothing had happened. It seemed that he did not feel any pain unlike when he touched the tangled part of the energy earlier and there was a backlash. Seeing him like this, Yuder felt a little relieved.

‘What should I do now?’

He pondered absentmindedly, and as if to provide an answer, the power of the Awakener writhed.

‘…Right. The tangled lump is surrounded by the power of the Awakener, so by creating a pathway from the outside for the tangled energy to move again… If I move…’

Yuder exhaled and moved his hand very slowly. As his hand enveloped in red energy moved slightly, the energy of the Awakener, which was surrounding the small lump of tangled power, expanded or contracted in response to his will.

“Is this the right thing to do?” The doubt that had meekly raised its head gradually became overwhelmed by certainty as he observed the dwindling energy, seemingly swallowed by a rising wave of uncertainty. A gale seemed to roar in his ears and sweat poured out like rain. All his energy seemed to be sucked away, focused solely on moving his hand.

How many times had he moved it like that?

The tangled energies had completely untangled, vanishing with a rustle. All that remained was a clean flow of energy, finding its original place with no obstructions. Yuder finally let out the breath he’d been holding, quietly observing this spectacle.

“Ah…”

He had actually done it.

The sight was astonishing, almost unbelievable.

He had only managed to remove one entangled root of power within Kishiar's body, but it felt like he had accomplished the greatest feat of his life. His heart pounded like it had when he had managed to run over an entire mountain. He couldn't be sure, but Kishiar, who had his eyes closed, seemed to be breathing more slowly and steadily than before.

'…I think it's impossible to do anything more.'

Along with his instinctive judgement, Yuder slowly let his hand fall. The red energy that had wrapped around his hand gradually faded and all the sights that he had seen through his eyes blurred. Intense fatigue and hunger struck him.

After a while, when he opened his eyes again, he only saw the normal room with no strange power visible.

"…"

He was seated in a position where he could watch Kishiar, who was asleep with his eyes tightly closed.

But the morning sun pouring in through the closed curtain, the deep purple spots on his hands, and his palms feeling hot as if they were burned were all shining like evidence that something had happened here for a considerable amount of time.

Yuder slowly rolled up his sleeve. The skin that turned purple stretched endlessly. Lowering his sleeve and pulling a bit on the clothes near his shoulder to look inside, the spots had spread below his chest.

'…'

His head felt dizzy for a moment, but oddly enough, there was no pain.

‘I wonder if it would be different if I use my power…’

Yuder cautiously tried to use a bit of water power with one finger raised. His initial plan was to conjure a small stream of water.

But a moment later, enough water to fill a kettle spilled over in the air, drenching his knees and face.

While blankly blinking at his wet knees, Yuder tried to summon wind. He had only planned to conjure enough power to dry the water, but in an instant, a hot wind strong enough to take his breath away blew, not only drying his clothes but making them stiff.

‘What on earth…’

There was no doubt about the control of his power. But the results were amplified by several times. It was only natural that the experiment shown by Thais Yulman and his apprentice Alik flashed through his mind. He fumbled in his pocket wondering if there was a catalyst in his clothes, but there was nothing in the casual clothes he wore to bed.

Yuder, who was about to get up from his spot relieved that Kishiar hadn’t woken up yet, suddenly found something and paused again.

‘Has the spot faded?’

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Chapter 228

‘Have the spots faded?’

He thought it might be an illusion, but it wasn’t. His hand, which had been so deeply dyed it almost appeared black, had noticeably lightened to a faint purple hue.

Yuder flipped his hand back and forth, examining it, then once again pulled down the collar of his shirt to peer inside.

‘The area hasn’t shrunk.’

The spots that had spread from his shoulder to his chest hadn’t significantly reduced in size. However, it too had faded considerably. Yuder stared at it for a moment before letting out a deep sigh.

‘Let’s think this through.’

What had changed between the time he received divine healing and now?

‘Back then, every time I used the Awakener’s power, the stain spread and the pain increased. Healing was painful too. After the second gender manifestation and the basement incident, things improved… but now…’

He hadn’t used the Awakener’s power in the usual way, but rather, during the process of examining Kishiar, a red energy suddenly burst from his hand and wrapped around his arm, causing the stain to spread. Despite the discoloration area increasing significantly, the pain was less than expected, and when he used his inherent Awakener power, the color faded. Unlike when he received divine healing, there was no pain, and the most distinct change was not a reduction in area, but a lightening of color.

‘The lack of pain is understandable, considering my body has been like that since it manifested the second gender. But how should I interpret this red power that flowed from my hand?’

Yuder speculated that the cause of this strange situation was the red power that had flowed from his hand. The Awakener’s power he usually used didn’t have that color. Like other Awakeners, it was barely visible, like a faint shimmering haze, only when he concentrated intensely.

‘Except for when it glowed while connected to the power of the Red Stone in the basement, and today…’

Various events he had seen and heard about passed through his cluttered mind.

The similarity of the red power that flowed from his hand when connected to the Red Stone.

The gradual changes in his body related to the spots.

The hypotheses and speculations of Thais Yulman. The metaphor of poison that Enon had mentioned.

The amplified power after removing the tangled mass of energy inside Kishiar.

And the medium.

Yuder stopped the repetitive motion of clenching and unclenching his fist.

‘The medium.’

Enon had previously speculated that if his body had successfully absorbed some of the power of the Red Stone that had infiltrated his body, he might have become a living medium, indistinguishable from

the Red Stone itself. In that case, the original power he possessed might have been enhanced by the addition of the raw power of the Red Stone.

‘After hearing that, I thought that the power of the Red Stone, which had infiltrated and merged like the stain, might have transformed to enhance the Awakener’s power I originally possessed… But could it be that it’s not transformed, but able to move in its original form?’

He didn’t know why it was flowing out, but once it did, it could be controlled to some extent by his will.

‘If the reason for the increase in my spots is the absorption of power different from my own, then the increase this time… maybe it’s because when I untangled Kishiar’s tangled powers, I absorbed some of it in the process. I recall hearing that mediums have a nature of drawing in power…’

Even though he had done it, the sensations from that time felt hazy, like something that happened in a dream. However, the sensation of firmly grabbing and moving an invisible force, and the burning tension of the moment when the two forces were tightly connected, were still relatively clear.

Yuder looked down at his hand, recalling Kishiar’s power mass that had gradually welled up and then decreased within it. At the time, he hadn’t given it much thought, but now, looking back, didn’t it seem similar to something being sucked in?

He couldn’t be sure if that was the right answer. Perhaps all his guesses could be wrong, but it seemed to be the best fit for the current situation. Yuder frowned, feeling a sudden strangeness in his own body, which had previously moved so familiarly.

‘It’s creepy… but there’s a possibility. If I’ve really become similar to a living medium…’

Thais Yulman had said that a medium containing the power of the Red Stone, despite not emitting any magic, absorbs the power of the Awakener, amplifies it, and then outputs it. The power that Yuder had just used was also displayed in a much amplified form than the amount used.

‘After using it, the power of the Red Stone in the medium was said to decrease slightly, and my spots also faded.’

Could this be interpreted as a sign that his guess was right?

Feeling an inexplicable dryness in his throat, Yuder swallowed and sighed deeply.

‘I was already considered non-human because of being too strong, I wonder what will happen if this fact becomes known.’

Becoming stronger was good. However, Yuder preferred getting stronger through training rather than gaining an unknown power in this way. More than anything, the hazy feeling when the red energy wrapped around or connected with his body was not to his liking.

The strange sensation of knowing the essence of things he didn’t know or understanding how to move next just by looking.

‘But, thanks to the red power popping out at the right moment, I was able to see the state of Kishiar’s body. Should I be thankful, then?’

He was a little worried about how the mass of energy, which he wasn’t sure whether he had properly removed or absorbed, would affect Kishiar when he woke up later. But seeing his much more relaxed breathing and expression, his instinct seemed to tell him that it wouldn’t lead to a bad outcome.

“Huff…”

Once he had somewhat organized his thoughts, his eyes felt gritty as if he hadn’t slept for days, and fatigue rushed over him. Yuder sat down on the chair and looked at Kishiar’s face.

He had a truly handsome face. The golden eyelashes that sparkled in the faint light coming through the curtain, and the alluring lips that caught the eye with their returned vitality were all delicate and beautiful.

However, Yuder thought that it was far better to see things with his eyes open than with them shut.

‘I can’t believe I’m having these thoughts in this situation.’

He let out a sigh of hollow amusement, finding it ridiculous that he was even capable of such thoughts in his terribly exhausted and chaotic state.

‘First, I cannot walk around looking like this, so let’s put in some more effort to eliminate the spots as much as possible. I don’t know how much they will disappear, so I should check that too And what else am I checking?’

In all honesty, he wanted to simply sit and close his eyes for a moment. However, Yuder shook off such desire, gathering his strength. After doing several calculations considering the amplifying situation, he moved his hand slightly, and a flame of appropriate size flared up over the dying lamp.

Even after accomplishing what would have made his struggling comrades fall to their knees in despair, not a trace of pride showed on Yuder’s face. While maintaining the flame, he alternated his tired gaze between the gradually fading spots and Kishiar’s face, mentally calculating the time.

His head was beginning to grow fuzzy.

Suddenly, someone touched his body, which had fallen into a sleep so deep it was as if he were dead, without even dreaming.

‘Oh dear.’

A low muttering filled with complicated emotions echoed in his ear, and shortly after, another hand cautiously crept under his legs, lightly lifting him into their arms.

The scent that flooded his nostrils from the chest his face was pressed against was very familiar. It was strange as it was definitely a scent that shouldn’t exist in this world. As he furrowed his brows at its strangeness, he thought he could hear a chuckle from above his head.

‘Why is it that my body feels so light? I wonder if its a fairy.’

The arm that gently lowered Yuder onto a soft place didn’t leave immediately, instead lingering around for quite a while. Each time the hand gently brushed his tousled hair away from his forehead, the cool warmth strangely lifted his spirits.

This pleasant and drowsy sensation couldn’t possibly be real. After all, such a reality couldn’t exist for him. With a simple conclusion, his consciousness once again sank deep beneath the surface.

It couldn’t have been anything but a strange dream

Yuder suddenly woke from his sleep, opening his eyes. He was in the middle of keeping watch over the lamp flame, intending to confirm the fading spots till the end, but he couldn’t remember when he had fallen asleep.

Baffled, he raised his hand to see his skin had completely transformed. It appeared he had fallen asleep only after all the spots had faded. As he let out a sigh of relief and turned his gaze, he

noticed the room was empty. Kishiar was gone, and Yuder himself was unexpectedly lying down on the bed.

‘When did I lie down?’

He blankly turned his head towards the window which was shrouded in darkness due to the firmly closed curtain. Faint noises came from beyond, indicating that he hadn’t been asleep for too long.

Yuder managed to lift his languid body. Something fell from on top of him even before the blanket did. He looked down to find it was the edge of someone’s overcoat.

An overcoat much larger than any ordinary person’s and far too luxurious to be worn by anyone less than nobility. He didn’t need to see it to immediately know to whom it belonged.

‘Why is this here?’

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Chapter 229

‘…Why?’

Why had it been left behind? Puzzled, he picked up the clothing, and the long, trailing hem was suddenly tugged tight. Only then did Yuder realize that a portion of the garment had been trapped beneath him, causing a moment of embarrassment.

‘Surely, it wasn’t removed because of this… Does this mean I should return it today, after I leave first?’

No matter how much he thought about it, the latter seemed more plausible. After completely freeing the trapped hem of the garment, Yuder folded it roughly and set it aside, then rose from his spot. He felt less fatigued, perhaps due to the sleep he had, but his eyes were still quite heavy.

‘It’s a relief that I don’t necessarily have to participate in today’s training…’

Normally, he wouldn’t have been this tired just from staying up for a day. The likely cause of his poor condition was closely related to the incident that had occurred in the early morning, but since it was all a result of his own choices, there was no one to blame.

He sighed and prepared to go outside. First, he wanted to check if there was anything wrong with Kishiar’s body, so he folded the outer garment that he had left behind, draped it over his arm, and left the room.

However, before he could reach the Commander’s office, someone called out to Yuder in the hallway.

“Yuder!”

Turning his head, he found himself face-to-face with Steiber Rendley, who was the Deputy Commander of the Sul Division. He was with a few other members. As soon as they exchanged brief eye contact, Steiber immediately opened his mouth to ask a question.

“You weren’t seen all morning, did you go somewhere?”

His gaze was fixed on Kishiar’s clothes hanging on Yuder’s arm. He probably didn’t recognize whose clothes they were, but he seemed to guess that Yuder had been somewhere related to them.

“No, I just woke up a bit late… I was just about to get moving.”

“Oversleeping? That’s unusual.”

Steiber, who had widened his eyes, chuckled after a moment.

“You must have been tired from working too much these days. No matter how young you are, health is the most important. I’m over 40 now, and I can definitely feel that my body isn’t what it used to be. You should be careful in advance. You look quite pale, do you want some special health juice made at our bakery?”

Yuder thanked the kind middle-aged man who was showing concern for his pale complexion, assuring him that he was fine.

“But… what were you three discussing here? Was there an incident?”

The atmosphere between him and the other members was strangely different from usual. It didn’t seem like they were just chatting, and sure enough, when he asked, Steiber expressed admiration.

“How did you know? Actually, we were discussing an incident that happened at the training ground.”

An incident at the training ground? Yuder's eyebrows twitched at the unusual feeling.

"There doesn't seem to be anyone in the Commander's office, and it's also difficult for us to handle it on our own, so when I saw you, the assistant, I called you… haha."

"There's no one in the Commander's office? Nathan Zuckerman should be there."

After Kishiar entered his cycle, the Deputy Commanders rarely came to the Commander's office, but if they deemed it necessary, they occasionally came up to convey their opinions to Nathan Zuckerman or Yuder. Of course, Nathan Zuckerman wasn't always in the Commander's office, but if that were the case, he would have called Yuder to take some action, so it was incomprehensible that he had left his post without any news.

"I thought so too. But the door was completely locked. And there was someone who saw the Commander's carriage leaving a few hours ago. So we thought the Commander had temporarily gone out with Zuckerman and you."

Steiber, stroking his chin, sighed in response.

"It's fortunate that you were here… Hmm."

'The carriage left…?'

In that case, as Steiber said, it was highly likely that Kishiar had temporarily left the Cavalry and accompanied Nathan Zuckerman.

'I wonder what happened. He should barely be able to move since his cycle hasn't ended yet. Is he okay?'

He couldn't think of where they might have gone. Yuder decided to abandon his plan to go to the Commander's office for now.

“I see. I didn’t know the Commander had left.”

“If he didn’t tell you, he probably didn’t go far. It’s better to wait for him to return and tell us.”

“But Steiber… can everyone wait until then? The atmosphere isn’t very good right now…”

One of the members who had been with Steiber interjected with a furrowed face. It was Dover, who was relatively quiet among the members.

“If we go back and wait for the Commander to come, someone might really rush into the training ground to fight the Imperial Knights.

“That’s the problem… Hoo. Everyone has been patient enough, so I don’t know what to say…”

“I’m also worried about the condition of the item.”

“What exactly happened?”

Yuder cut off their conversation and opened his mouth. He couldn’t ignore the mention of the Imperial Knights.

‘What happened? Is it related to them?’

“Hmm. Well…”

Eventually, Steiber began to speak with a troubled look in his eyes.

“To put it briefly, it’s an emotional issue related to the use of the training ground. We were allowed to use the training ground only until the morning, and when one of us left, he realized he had left something behind and went to get it, but the knights wouldn’t let him in.”

“They wouldn’t let him in?”

At Yuder’s question, Dover, with his shoulders slumped, muttered, And they were extremely insulting.

“Even though it would only take a moment, and it was an important item, so we promised to get it right away, they mocked us. There have been similar incidents before, but it never got this serious. Today, it almost exploded. We thought of calling the Commander through Steiber and a few of us came back first, but we don’t know what to do in this situation. Phew.”

Among the training grounds that the Cavalry could use, the rest, except for the open space behind the barracks and the small space inside the barracks building, were originally used by the Imperial Knights. Kishiar had chosen the training grounds close to the barracks and allowed the Cavalry to use them for a set time, which the knights found extremely unpleasant.

They often sent silent threats and pressure to the Cavalry members during the change of training ground usage rights, and some even started quarrels as if to make them hear from outside before the training ended.

“Ever since the festival where the Cavalry’s name rose, it had been quiet, but I never thought this problem would erupt. I understood Steiber’s words, ‘we’ve endured as much as we could.’

“So… where are the other members who were training there now?”

“They’re still in front of the training ground.”

“How many?”

“About… fifteen.”

“And the Imperial Knights?”

“Over twenty.”

Yuder looked at the faces of the members, each with a different expression. Even the cautious Steiber, who suggested waiting for now, couldn’t hide his discomfort, indicating that he had been quite troubled by this issue. And yet they had endured until today. The long-standing feelings towards the Imperial Knights stirred anew.

“Yuder. Would you come with us if you’re okay?”

Dover, sighing deeply once again, asked Yuder for help.

“Whether we wait for the Commander or not, it seems difficult to calm those guys down with just us. The Imperial Knights might have provoked more in the meantime…”

The incident where Yuder single-handedly took down several Imperial Knights knights who were picking fights was already famous within the Cavalry. Seeing the hopeful looks in their eyes, Yuder felt strangely unfamiliar, but he nodded firmly.

“Okay.”

“Thank you, Yuder. It’s a matter that I, as the Deputy Commander, should be responsible for… It’s embarrassing, but I can’t be more relieved that you’re coming with us.”

Steiber lowered his voice and expressed his gratitude with a relieved face.

“No problem. I’m glad if I can help.”

“Just being there is already a big help. We’re sorry to call you out for this when you looked tired.”

Yuder looked at Steiber’s face thoughtfully. He was popular among the members and had excellent abilities, but he still lacked experience in playing the role of Deputy Commander in hostile situations. It was impressive to see him smiling honestly, without any sign of hurt pride, in such a situation.

‘Just like Ever, experience comes with time, so it doesn’t matter.’

This opportunity might be a good chance to show him how to handle such situations to some extent. It was a good choice for them to come to Kishiar first, but they also needed to know that there was no need to be considerate of the Imperial Knights.

“Dover! You’re here?”

“Where’s the Commander?”

“Huh? It’s not the Commander, Steiber and Yuder came together.”

“Yuder?”

“Yuder?”

Following Dover’s lead, they headed towards the training ground where the Cavalry members were said to be gathered. As they approached, the faces of those who could not hide their anger rushed toward them. Amidst them, Yuder spotted the familiar faces of the Eldore siblings and let out a low sigh. Indeed, if the Eldore siblings were involved, it was understandable why Dover was worried that the angry members might not be able to hold back any longer.

As he looked around, he saw knights inside the training ground, flaunting their swords as if to show off. They pretended not to care about this side, but anyone could see they were mocking. Most of them were strangers, but three were familiar. If he didn’t know their

names but recognized their faces, there was only one reason. They were the ones who had ignored Kishiar and passed by some time ago.

Upon recognizing their faces, Yuder's eyes gradually narrowed.

'Hmm…?'

After imprinting the faces of those who had ignored Kishiar in his mind, Yuder, who was looking around again, spotted another familiar knight.

'Kiolle da Diarca. Seeing him here again.'

He was the one among the knights who was yawning with the most nonchalant expression. He hadn't noticed Yuder yet, but after seeing him, Yuder thought that this matter might be resolved much better than he thought.

"Steiber! Listen! Those guys…"

"Did the Commander give permission? Then we can now enter the training ground, right?"

"Wait, just a moment. Let me speak first…"

In the midst of the excited Cavalry members, Yuder took a step forward to rescue Steiber, who was waving his hands as if surrounded by excited puppies.

"I'm sorry, but the Commander is not here right now."

"Huh?"

Upon hearing the soft yet strangely nerve-grabbing voice, the members all quieted down at once.

"He's not here? So we can't go in again?"

“Do we have to wait until we can go in tomorrow?”

The Eldore siblings asked in unison. Yuder, enduring the gaze of several pairs of eyes turned towards him, continued his words.

“No.”

His lips, which had been tightly closed, drew a faint upward curve.

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“Of course we must go in.”

” Yuder?”

Startled by Yuder’s unexpected proposal, Steiber, who had thought that Yuder came to help calm the members, could not hide his surprise as he stuttered from a distance.

‘What is he trying to do?’

Yuder looked back at the members after flashing a reassuring smile in Steiber’s direction.

“Who said they left something inside?”

“It’s me.”

From behind the gathered crowd, a Cavalry member, who had been looking somber, raised her hand and stepped forward.

‘Phieny Moffle. She can shoot arrows of wind that are invisible to the naked eye.’

Although she could only shoot about five arrows per day, the invisible attack was a valuable ability with high growth potential. Yuder glanced at the bow she was carrying on her back and nodded.

“Alright. Can you tell me exactly what you left inside?”

“It’s a leather pouch containing a wrist guard.”

Phieny stared at her bare hands and replied in a gloomy tone.

“I thought I had taken it after training I didnt realize I dropped it because I was in such a rush to leave.”

“When did you realize it was missing?”

“I noticed it as soon as I left the training ground and started walking.”

Upon realizing her pouch was missing, Phieny returned to the training ground but was blocked by the imperial knights who were already inside. Her companions who had followed her out of concern protested, but all they received were cold disdain and scoffs.

“I feel so sorry and ashamed in front of everyone else. I should have checked my pouch more thoroughly It’s all my fault.”

“Don’t say that, Phieny.”

Another member standing next to Phieny raised his voice in fury.

“It’s not a simple wrist guard. You’re worried that the damned knights will trample on the wrist guard that your deceased mother made, what’s wrong with that? We’re not here because we want to be. You don’t have anything to apologize for.”

At his words, everyone nodded their heads in agreement. Yuder surreptitiously glanced at Steiber who by now looked displeased. He had heard about the lost item, but he didn’t seem to know about its sentimental value.

“Steiber.”

After saying his name with the meaning of ‘you should go in after hearing all this,’ Steiber met his gaze with a complicated look in his eyes.

“Phew… alright. If that’s the case, we should go in and retrieve it. But, do you have any good ideas?”

“What kind of plan could there possibly be?”

Yuder quietly answered as he moved.

“Even though the training ground usage time is divided, that only applies to training activities. They can’t prevent simple visits. We just need to go in and find it.”

“Uh, um. Okay. I don’t know whether I should say it’s good because it’s simple, or it’s quite clear.”

Looking at Yuder with a peculiar gaze, Steiber looked up at the sky once, bowed his head towards the ground, and let out a long sigh again.

“I’m asking just in case, what if they attack us?”

“What do you mean, what if?”

Yuder, who was walking through the parted Cavalry members, stopped right in front of the entrance to the training ground and turned around.

“Steiber. Surely, you’re not worried that we might lose to them?”

A word of provocation, accompanied by a smirk, had quietened the crowd.

A moment later, Steiber broke the silence with a hollow laugh.

“There’s no way that could be.”

“Yes, I think so too.”

No problem then. Yuder left his words unspoken, but everyone understood his intention. The members, finally permitted to enter, began to chatter in deep excitement.

“Good. Of course, it has to be like this!”

“We can go in now, right? We will show them what we are made of!”

“Wait, just a moment.”

Phieny, who still wore a sorry expression, raised her voice lastly, standing beside the members who were preparing to enter with clenched fists and high spirits.

“But the Commander is not here, what if he finds out about this later.”

Yuder glanced back at her and responded briefly.

“It’s okay. That’s the least of our worries.”

“What?”

He was willing to bet that Kishiar, who learned of this event belatedly, would regret not having been part of such an intriguing incident.

“Alright, let’s go in. Whoever finds the leather pouch that Phieny lost, immediately raise your hand and shout out loud. Don’t delay the search.”

Steiber loudly gave the final notice to the members. Once the decision was made, his attitude became carefree, as if a weight had been lifted off his chest.

“Find either me or Yuder immediately if you think it’s dangerous. Well, there shouldn’t be anyone like that here, though.”

“Of course.”

The members responded in unison.

They entered the training ground eagerly, ready to blow off all the frustration they had accumulated so far. The area was spacious enough for dozens of people to train scattered about, so it seemed that finding a small pouch would take some time.

“What are you doing!”

Then, a knight swinging his sword nearby came straight forward and started yelling.

“I kept telling you not to enter, yet you intrude? Leave immediately. If you do not retreat within three seconds, I will attack you for ignoring the warning.”

“Let’s scatter and start looking.”

Steiber gestured dismissively, ignoring the knight’s threats. The members scattered smoothly as if they had been waiting for this. The knight who had been brandishing his sword dramatically was taken aback, his eyes wide open in surprise.

“Can’t… can’t you hear me? I said, leave right now……!”

“Why should we?”

Yuder opened his mouth in place of Steiber.

“We’re not intending to stay here forever, we will leave as soon as we find the item we lost. I don’t understand why you’re threatening us for that.”

“Threatening……? How dare this insolent peasant slander me!”

Why did these guys always bring up “peasants” when they ran out of arguments? It’s as tedious as it was in his previous life, Yuder thought, letting out a small sigh. The knight took his action as an even greater insult.

“You insolent boy. I will correct that bad habit of yours today.”

The knight aimed his sword at Yuder, making Steiber, who was standing nearby, furrow his brows. Yuder responded with a slight nod to his inquiring look, signaling not to worry.

“My beloved sword Alrund has no mercy. Even if you lick the ground crying, bark like a dog, and beg, I will never forgive you! You will regret provoking me!”

‘That’s a peculiarly detailed description. Perhaps he’s a pervert of that taste.’

Yuder distinctly remembered there being a rule in the Imperial Knight about never drawing one’s sword without cause, yet for some reason, the knights he encountered had no problem whipping out their swords and bragging about it, regardless of what was said. It was questionable whether they even realized that their conduct lacked the knightly or aristocratic dignity they so boasted about.

‘Well, no matter. All I need to do is kill off their deception today.’

Shall we start with this one? Yuder contemplated, as he eyed the knight’s sword.

“What’s going on here?”

However, at that moment, the other knights seemed to sense the impending crisis and peered from behind. Yuder noticed among them the ones who had previously ignored Kishiar, and felt relieved that he wouldn’t have to go hunting for them.

“The impudent commoners who have been making a ruckus outside have dared to trespass into the training grounds. And among them, this one has shown particularly insolent behavior, so I thought it would be best to teach him a lesson before expelling him!”

The knight, who had behaved entirely differently when dealing with Yuder and the Cavalry, reported loudly.

“He did that?”

The knights collectively glared at Yuder. Instead of answering, Yuder straightened Kishiar’s clothes, which he was still casually draping over his arm, an act that anyone could interpret as a clear sign of disregard.

“Huh! He must have nine lives. Is he of a significant rank?”

It was so like them to judge everything based on rank or social status. Yuder just tilted his head in response, swallowing a twisted smile.

“What’s your name?”

“…”

“Ha, it seems you’ll need to be half-dead before you regain your senses!”

‘You lot are the ones more likely to be half-dead.’

However, Yuder was once again prevented from acting as another group of knights made their appearance.

“Everyone’s here. I clearly asked you to find out why the Cavalry members suddenly came here and started wreaking havoc…”

The man approaching with an angry voice suddenly stopped his sentence. Kiolle da Diarca stared at Yuder with wavering eyes.

“…”

“…”

Why are you here?

To the agonizing silence, Yuder could only respond with a significant smile. Kiolle, who faced the smile, momentarily tried to step back but stopped himself just in time.

“Sir Diarca, what’s the matter?”

Another knight standing next to Kiolle asked him cautiously, sensing something was off. Kiolle then regained his composure and turned his pale face.

“Nothing… nothing at all. But why is everyone crowding around… one… person?”

“Listen, Sir Diarca, this man has…!”

The knight who had first attempted to attack Yuder came forward, excitedly opening his mouth like a fish out of water. With every word he uttered, the hostility towards Yuder among the knights escalated, and Kiolle’s face turned increasingly pale.

“…So, it was time to teach this man, who dares to ignore the entire Imperial Knight, a lesson. Judging from his fearlessness, it appears he holds a significant rank. I believe it would be appropriate to discipline him first, and then expel the rest.”

“…How could you do what even I couldn’t?”

“Pardon?”

A knight who hadn’t clearly heard Kiolle’s muttered question asked for clarification, but Kiolle didn’t repeat himself. With a quick

intake of breath, Kiolle looked at Yuder, his face a mixture of unease and impatience.

“Y-you… No, what… What in the world are you doing here?”

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He seemed desperate to declare, “You’re such a pest,” but the oath prevented him from doing so. The fact that he didn’t want to acknowledge their acquaintance was evident in his awkward phrasing. Yuder clenched his jaw inwardly at the strange dialogue.

‘So be it… Well, Kiolle complied with my request during the second gender manifestation, so I can fulfill this small wish of his too.’

Even if Kiolle, the person he was dealing with, had hardly met his expectations, he had to admit he was grateful.

Scanning over Kiolle and the other knights, Yuder responded in a low, even voice.

“What do you think we came here for? You should know why we are here, yet you ask. I find it hard to guess why.”

“What don’t you understand? What are you talking about?”

As Kiolle raised his eyebrows, the knights standing beside him raised their voices all at once.

“There’s no need to listen, Sir Diarca! Sir Diarca may not know because he arrived late, but they’ve been making unreasonable demands from before training started.”

“That’s right. Despite the time for using the training grounds having passed, they insisted on entering! You should stop listening.”

Ah, that’s when Yuder realized. Kiolle must have arrived at the training grounds later than the other knights, hence he didn’t know the details of what happened. The entrance was at both ends, so if

he had come from the opposite side, he wouldn’t have encountered the Cavalry members on this side.

“Our team dropped something during training here. We said we’d leave as soon as we found it, but you wouldn’t listen. How is that unreasonable?”

“Nonsense! Clearly, it’s an excuse to interrupt our training!”

It was a childish and malicious interpretation, doubting its very credibility. Yuder turned his head toward the knight who had yelled at him.

“Unlike you, sir knight, we are very busy people. Would over ten of us, including the Deputy Commander and Commander’s assistant, be here digging in the ground for no reason?”

“What?”

The knight who asked in confusion soon grew furious, as if he were about to breathe fire.

“You, you insignificant wretch, what are you saying? Are you implying I have nothing to do?!”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Cursed fool, draw your sword, now!”

“Quiet!”

Kiolle raised his hand to calm the enraged knight. His deep, coal-black eyes skeptically scanned Yuder’s face.

“So you came here just for an item?”

“As I’ve mentioned.”

What conclusion would Kiolle Diarca draw? Whether he believed or not, Yuder's task wouldn't change, but seeing the man's furrowed face and hesitation, he realized that the man had indeed changed since their first meeting.

'If it were the past, he wouldn't have listened to a word and would have attacked immediately.'

He had thought the man had no ability to learn, but it seemed even he accumulated experience.

"Sir Diarca! Why are you hesitating? Are you thinking of listening to this guy?"

As Kiolle's moment of hesitation lengthened, the knights at his side became restless.

"Sir Diarca, you must know these guys are…"

"Enough with the chatter. It's too loud!"

Kiolle finally exploded due to the knights who didn't allow him time to think, raising his voice sharply.

"You think I've been thinking, don't you? Because I've been quiet recently, you must think it's amusing. I'm the highest-ranking here, yet looking at your attitudes, it's like you're the superiors. Is my decision-making really that detestable?"

"N… No, not at all."

In truth, the knights had begun to take Kiolle, who had been quiet of late, lightly. They became instantly anxious at his words and clamped their mouths shut. Kiolle, too, with an insider's instinct, quickly realized their momentary prick of conscience. He glared at the knights, grinding his teeth, then turned his head towards Yuder.

“You!”

“Yes?”

“I will give you five minutes. Find whatever it is within that time!”

“Sir Diarca!”

The knights opened their mouths in surprise, but Kiolle’s fury did not abate.

“Training will temporarily halt. Everyone will gather around and commence Basic Training Drill Number 16, from beginning to end. Move, now!”

The knights’ lips twitched, as if they wanted to protest. However, nobody wanted to make an enemy of the Diarca Family, so they did not dare voice their objections. In the end, they had to gather their comrades and perform the hardest physical exercise routine that could be done on the spot, known as Basic Training Drill Number 16.

‘I did not anticipate things would turn out this way… Well, let’s observe for now.’

Watching the pitiful sight of the knights, who had once looked down upon the Cavalry, straining so much their faces turned bright red, Yuder turned away as the members approached him.

“Yuder.”

“Did you find the item?”

“Um… that’s the thing, we found it, but…”

One of the members replied with a peculiar expression on his face.

“Well, it’s a bit…”

“What? Is there a problem?”

“Well, it’s in pretty bad shape.”

“Bad shape? How bad?”

Upon Yuder’s inquiry, Phieny, the owner of the item, came forward, showing a pouch she was holding.

“…This is it. Found it near the entrance on the opposite side where I’ve never been.”

The leather pouch resting in Phieny’s hand was in shambles, as if it had been slashed with a sword. Fortunately, the wrist guard had not broken, but it was severely scratched and dust-covered as if someone had deliberately stomped on it. To anyone who looked, it was an act committed with malicious intent to insult.

The warmth faded from Yuder’s eyes as Steiber’s expression darkened.

“…Who would do such a thing.”

“All the commoners’ stuff is the same, why act so shocked?”

At that moment, the knights, who had finally finished their basic training routine and risen from their spots, jeered loudly as if they wanted everyone to hear.

“Now that you’ve found your precious item, stop dirtying the Imperial Knights’ training ground with your filthy feet and get out!”

Phieny moved her shoulders roughly as if trying to suppress a sob. The eyes of the Cavalry members filled with a sharp light.

“Hah, glaring at us? What are you going to do about it? After all, you’re just a bunch of nobodies.”

“…”

There wasn’t a single person present who didn’t know that the term ‘nobodies’ was a derogatory nickname referring to Kishiar, the leader of the Cavalry. Some of the knights gave disapproving glances to the one who had uttered these words, but he showed no signs of remorse.

‘Well, I guess it’s not surprising, considering this is the same man who disrespected Kishiar himself.’

Yuder took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and then opened them again.

Kiolle involuntarily swallowed a gulp as he faced Yuder’s darkened gaze. He had seen Yuder wear such an expression several times before. Each of those times had ended with a not-so-pleasant outcome for him.

“Kiolle, Diarca.”

“What, what is it?”

“I am going to personally find out who tampered with our member’s item, starting now. If you want to stop me, come out now.”

Kiolle had joined the training late, so he wasn’t involved in this incident. Despite his wounded pride, he had allowed the members time to find their item, so he was willing to give him a chance.

“If you step back, I won’t lay a hand on you. But if you come forward, you will have to remember the consequences.”

“How dare that arrogant brat disrespect Sir Diarca!”

“Sir Diarca! Do not forgive him!”

However, Kiolle did not point his sword at Yuder as the knights had hoped. Although his face expressed immense anger at the insulting speech, he turned his body slowly after a long silence and stepped back.

“… Sir Diarca?”

“I can’t be bothered to intervene in matters that have nothing to do with me. I won’t deal with this personally.”

Although his words sounded arrogant, they were clearly an act. The memory of Yuder easily rendering several men helpless with a single button at the Harvest Festival was vividly stirring in his eyes. He did not want to experience that again. The man in front of him from the Cavalry was the most powerful and ferocious monster Kiolle had ever met in his life.

Yuder removed his gaze from Kiolle, who had made the wisest decision of his life, and looked at the remaining knights.

‘The rest… 23 of them.’

He handed Kishiar’s clothes, which he had been wearing on his arm until now, to one of the members next to him.

“Sorry, but can you take care of this outfit for a while?”

“Huh? Oh, sure.”

“Stay back where you won’t be affected.”

“What’s he saying, that arrogant brat. Ha ha ha. I guess he’s finally feeling scared?”

Yuder confidently stood in front of the knights mocking him. He had a sword on his waist but had no intention of drawing it.

“It seems you’re ready to shed tears for your comrade, but from the beginning, you and us were never in a position to duel… Oh!”

One of the knights who was sneering suddenly slipped and hit the back of his head on the ground. His last memory was of a flash of light in front of him before he passed out without a sound.

“That’s correct. There’s no need for me to duel with you guys.”

Yuder, who had easily knocked out the knight by manipulating the ground under his feet, quietly replied to the astonished knights.

“Because there’s no need to draw my sword against those who are far inferior to me.”

“You… you arrogant…! Aaargh!”

The knight who had eagerly drawn his sword screamed in surprise as Yuder’s gesture made his sword swing forward uncontrollably. Kiolle, who was watching from afar with his arms crossed, furrowed his brows, feeling a sense of dj vu.

“You call yourself a knight but you can’t even handle a sword properly.”

“You damn brat!”

The knight, angered by Yuder’s nonchalant voice, grabbed his sword and charged again, only to stumble awkwardly forward due to the ground and sword not moving as he intended. Strangely, the ground where his face had hit had suddenly become soft, and he had to flail around, trying to get up, his face buried in the dirt.

“What, what is this. Ptooey! Spit! Ugh!”

“Quite a brave display, indeed.”

The knight, his face covered in dirt, spat out the earth that had entered his mouth, his face turning crimson as he hurled abuse.

“You bastard, die!”

However, moments later, he shrieked in terror as he saw his sword, which he had hoisted up to strike down with full force, warping and twisting as if it were soft clay.

“Ahhhh! My sword!”

The knight, who had thrown away his beloved sword, took several steps back as he looked at Yuder with eyes full of terror. Overwhelmed by humiliation, disgrace, and fear, he turned and sprinted, only to slip again, hit his forehead on the ground, and lose consciousness.

‘I’ll make sure they fall in the most humiliating manner in front of everyone. Because that’s what hurts them the most.’

His power had appeared much stronger than usual. There was no pain in the back of his hand. On the contrary, he felt an overwhelming sense that he could do anything, even if he only tried a little. It was somewhat difficult to control.

“Randen!”

“You monster, we won’t let you get away with this!”

A few knights charged at Yuder simultaneously, crying out the names of the fallen knight. They seemed to think that there would be a chance if there were many of them. However, the skills of these mere knights, who hadn’t even produced a piece of Aura yet, were only pitiful.

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Yuder leisurely watched those charging at him, not moving until they came close. A flurry of swords ruthlessly descended on him all at once.

“Yuder!”

Despite knowing his strength, his companions screamed in surprise from behind, but the horrendous scene they imagined did not materialize. The steel swords, failing to penetrate Yuder’s body, paused in mid-air as if struck against the void. At his casual gesture, they exploded outwards.

“Ugh, damn!”

“Arggh!”

The clash of steel against steel sounded as those who lost their grip on their swords appeared one after another. Their weapons, too, bounced away, scattering in all directions before tumbling to the ground.

“Ah, it hurts. My wrist… my wrist…”

“This can’t be… it’s a nightmare… it’s not true…!”

There were those who, writhing in pain from their broken wrists, rolled on the ground clutching their arms. Some, terrified, scrambled backward, and some murmured in denial, shaking their heads. No one dared to pick up their fallen swords. As they frantically retreated, more knights charged forward, but their movements were bereft of vigor.

“You, insolent cur!”

Who’s the insolent one here, Yuder thought, as he deftly dodged an incoming sword with a slight duck of his head. He swiftly cut at the exposed wrist of the knight, sending his sword flying.

“Ah, monster!”

“You can’t blame others when you can’t even master the basics.”

The knights who had charged so far were all riddled with flaws, their bodies stiff from inadequate training. They lacked even the determination to fight till the end. They were worse than Kiolle, who at least fought fiercely till the end. The name of the Imperial Knights was laughable. He had suspected it since they began their pointless exercises in the name of training. Most seemed to be idle nobles who had joined the Knights just for their lineage.

Yuder coolly addressed the remaining knights, who were hesitating to charge at him.

“Do you not even have the courage to charge?”

“…”

“If you won’t come, I will. Is that fine with you?”

At his cold, uncompromising tone, as if training subordinates, the knights charged again, their faces filled with rage.

“You, damn you, you think I’m standing still out of fear? Ah, aaargh!”

However, in the end, no one’s sword could land a proper attack on Yuder. The ludicrous confrontation, unprecedented, insulting, and relentless, continued. The knights stumbled around, falling between their uncontrollable swords and the rebellious ground, their screams echoing as they rolled and writhed.

In this process, where all twenty-three of them were impartially struck down, Yuder made sure to deal a slightly more heartfelt blow to those whose faces he had taken care to remember.

Those who had insulted Kishiar, those who had looked down on him, those who had threatened to make Yuder kneel and lick the ground, all were taken aback by the force from behind, and screamed as their faces hit the ground. They couldn't regain their senses as the ground shook when they tried to escape, the wind blinded them, water and fire charged at them, and their weapons refused to obey.

"Ah, please, save me!"

Witnessing the scene, the Cavalry members were newly immersed in a surge of emotion. Everything they had imagined, everything they had swallowed down in irritation and anger, was unfolding into reality before their eyes.

None of them would have lost against the knights if they had stepped forward, but none could have manipulated their opponent and made them look so ridiculous as Yuder. The knights, stumbling about and shouting, did not look noble in the slightest. It was doubtful they would ever witness such a hilarious spectacle again in their lives.

"Ah… haha. Hahaha."

At first, they had remained on edge, ready to assist Yuder if necessary. Gradually, however, they began to laugh, one by one. The laughter grew, and as time passed, they transformed into something akin to a cheering squad.

"Watch out, Yuder! One's coming from behind! Yes! That's it!"

"Where's that cockiness they showed when they were laughing at us earlier?"

“Hang on a little more! Is that all you can do after boasting about your daily training and swinging your swords around? Even Jimmy, the youngest in the Cavalry, would do better than ten of you!”

“…”

But the knights no longer had the spirit to even hear their taunts.

‘That monstrous guy…!’

Watching from afar, Kiolle shivered privately at the chilling sensation running down his spine. He was tremendously relieved he had made the pretense of retreating. If he had stepped forward, he would have ended up just like the others, groveling on the ground. When he had faced Yuder before, he had passed out instantly and had not known what had happened. Now, watching from a distance, it seemed like the ones charging at Yuder were like small insects rushing into a great natural disaster and falling.

‘No matter how I look at it, he’s not doing his best. He’s intentionally showing weakness to let those on the receiving end feel their powerlessness.’

Those on the receiving end might not realize, but from the outside, it was clear that Yuder was purposefully showing vulnerabilities so they wouldn’t completely lose hope. When a desperate man rushed in, the gap would disappear in an instant, and all that would return was punishment as if he had been waiting.

“Why are you doing this? We haven’t done anything to you! What have I done wrong?”

Finally, a knight who had fallen into utter despair cried out in terror. Yuder, who had been exerting his strength, momentarily halted and looked down at him with a blank expression. The knight, guessing that Yuder had stopped moving due to his words, shouted even louder.

“Do you think might makes right?! Or are you prancing around because you trust the Duke of Peletta behind you?! Either way, doing this without clear reasons is cowardly!”

“Why do you think they did it then?”

“What?”

“Isn’t that what my comrades should have said to you guys? Even when we endured it numerous times and tried to let it pass, you kept insulting us just because you were part of the Imperial Knight. Now you’re saying that me, a member of the Cavalry, shouldn’t do this to you? Why?”

For a moment, the knight’s mouth hung open, his face resembling someone who had been hit over the head. He seemed to want to respond but couldn’t find the words. A cold air settled over Yuder’s face.

“If I weren’t stronger than you, you wouldn’t be saying any of this now. Am I wrong?”

“No, no…”

“I have no intention of listening to the words of weaklings who, with nothing but the title of an Imperial Knight, mistake the prestige built up by their predecessors as their own.”

“Do you honestly believe that a mere Cavalry deserves to be compared to the Imperial Knights? Don’t insult us!”

“Insult?”

As Yuder snapped his fingers, water formed from thin air and smacked the knight across his face.

“Splutter, ugh!”

“I’m not sure who’s insulting who here. The real insult to the Imperial Knights seems to be you, who’ve forgotten both your knightly code and your honor.”

“…”

“And the Cavalry has no need to stand shoulder to shoulder with anyone else. We’ll make sure of that.”

Kiolle swallowed his dry saliva. The way Yuder paid back any insult several times over was terrifyingly devilish. Yet, he couldn’t help but be drawn to the man who was devilish in his own right.

He absentmindedly gazed at the small mark, a testament to the oath, imprinted on his hand. The restrictive symbol left by the man before him didn’t cause much practical inconvenience, but it tormented him effectively nonetheless. At first, he couldn’t reveal this shameful proof to anyone, then he couldn’t find anyone capable enough to release the oath without crossing his father, and he didn’t dare free the oath against such a monster, not knowing what kind of repercussion he’d face. Now looking at the mark, the harsh words Yuder had thrown at him came flooding back.

‘Do you always have to offer something to persuade others, is that it?’

‘All I asked for was a reason for you to survive here, not unnecessary wealth or status. Can’t you even provide that? Are you really more exceptional than a corpse?’

‘Those who know neither knightly code nor honor.’

Watching the knights struggling and thrashing before him, he felt an odd sensation. But no matter how much he pondered, he couldn’t pinpoint the reason for his confusion. All that remained was his profound question about Yuder.

How could that man go so far for the Cavalry?

Was there something so prideful about working under a powerless Duke Peletta that he could reject an enticing recruitment offer from Diarca Family and relentlessly beat down noble knights as if there was no tomorrow?

Up until now, he'd thought him to be a madman, but somehow, his words carried a certain consistency. The man was speaking of a value unknown to Kiolle, who had grown up in Diarca Family.

While Kiolle was still puzzled by this newfound question, Yuder finally paused and scanned the area. No knights stood on their own two feet. Only the 23 defeated, trembling in fear, sprawled on the ground.

'I intended to prolong their humiliation as long as possible, yet the resilience of the Imperial Knights is merely this?'

"Stand up. Is this all you've got?"

He nudged a fallen knight's side with the tip of his foot. The knight gasped and violently shook his head.

"S-stop. Enough! Please, n-no more!"

His speech was muddled due to a broken tooth, sounding like a child with a lisp. The immense humiliation and shock reduced him to tears. It was truly pitiful, but there was no one there to feel sorry for him.

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Chapter 233

“Why should I stop when no one has yet to apologize?”

“This…this devil!”

“Yuder. Why bother being kind? Judging by your cheeky backtalk, you certainly don’t act like a loser. Why don’t you grovel a bit more? Or should we do it for you?”

One of the Cavalry members watching from a distance shouted loudly, causing the knight to flinch. Yuder tilted his head and looked down at him.

“Maybe it’s time for a switch.”

“If we’re switching, Finn and I want to go first!”

Upon hearing talk of a switch, the knights who were lying down felt a mix of despair and hope at the sight of the cute faces of the Eldore siblings who had suddenly stepped forward. The despair came from the severe humiliation, while the hope came from the thought that they might stand a chance against the other Cavalry members who were not Yuder.

Yes, yes. We could beat those seemingly weak individuals!’

But at that moment, the Eldore siblings began to inflate like giant loaves of bread, crushing the knights’ hopes.

“It’s been a while since we did this.”

“I’m not sure if I can control my strength.”

Oh, God!

Looking up at the Eldore siblings who were growing endlessly large, each knight called out to God internally. Their uniforms, made from specially processed fabric, strained and seemed ready to rip, as their bodies transformed into solid, muscular stone from the neck down. Yet their adorable faces were still small, perched on top of their shoulders, a sight both terrible and horrifying.

The horror peaked when Finn, having completed his transformation, casually stepped forward, instantly shattering a sword beneath his foot like a piece of hard candy. The knights, having lost all fighting spirit and reason, simultaneously bowed their heads and screamed.

“We surrender! We admit defeat!”

“Please stop now! We apologize! We’ll tell you who ripped the pouch!”

Yuder, looking down at them, chuckled. They had proven themselves cowards and fools to the very end.

—

“Darn, what a waste. We rarely transform, and we didn’t even get to touch them.”

“But it was fun when Phieny shot invisible arrows at the pouch ripper at the end, making him pee his pants.”

“That was fun.”

“And it was funny when the guy who insulted our Commander cried in punishment.”

“Did he pee his pants too? Why are there so many cowards in the Imperial Knights?”

Yuder, hearing the Eldore siblings' chatter, barely cracked a smile.

They were on their way back to the Cavalry building, having left a warning for the defeated knights. If they didn't want today's events to become public, they should behave better in the future. Of course, there had been a bit of additional punishment before they left, but it was a fitting consequence.

As Yuder mused on this, Steiber approached him and whispered something out of earshot of the other members.

"Yuder."

"Yes."

"Do you really think we should leave the red-eyed knight's mouth unchecked?"

The red-eyed knight Steiber referred to was Kiolle. He was the only one who had escaped the Cavalry's punishment. Looking scared yet eager to speak, Kiolle watched Yuder but ultimately didn't say anything and vanished after tending to the other knights.

'Considering he didn't run off and actually helped, he might have changed… just a little.'

"It will be alright."

Based on his observations so far, Kiolle wasn't particularly kind or intelligent. Yet, he lacked the shadowy demeanor often associated with scheming. Perhaps, due to his pampered lineage, he had lived comfortably without needing to flex his intellectual muscles. But thanks to his simplicity, Yuder found it somewhat easy to understand him.

‘Had he been smarter, he could have made better use of the information he had observed and heard during our encounters. However, seeing as that has not happened… probably the most he can do in this situation is to report it to his superiors.’

Truthfully, he wasn’t of good quality as an heir of power. Despite his pride in his bloodline, he didn’t seem overly ambitious, and whenever he opened his mouth, he made enemies, making it hard for him to survive for long.

Could such a person really change?

If so, to what extent?

‘If Kiolle manages to survive a long time in this life… would that also be considered a variable?’

Nonchalantly contemplating thoughts that would have offended Kiolle if he knew, Yuder moved on. Despite having exerted quite a lot of effort, he felt more energized than before he went out. He wasn’t sure if this was a normal situation, but he intended to keep an eye on the situation.

“Yuder! Where have you been?”

Upon returning to the Cavalry building, Yuder was greeted by Kanna, who had been busily scurrying about.

“I went out briefly to assist Steiber with some Sul Division related matter. But why?”

“The Commander has decided to change the departure schedule for the west! Originally, the Commander was planning to depart last with the third detachment, but now he’s going with the first. He was looking for you; hasn’t he seen you yet?”

“What?”

“Is that true, Kanna? The Commander definitely left his office… when did he come back?”

Simultaneously doubting his own hearing at the shocking news and questioning Kanna, Steiber, who was next to him, anxiously chimed in. Only then did Kanna seem to recognize his presence and widened her eyes slightly.

“Ah, Steiber. I’m sorry. The Commander had left his office? I’m not sure about that. He came back with Zuckerman just a while ago and asked if I had seen Yuder while discussing the schedule change.”

“Kanna. Did you see the Commander yourself?”

Yuder unusually asked hastily. Kanna, with a flustered face, nodded her head.

“Yes.”

“Then his health is… no. Thank you. I need to go up right away.”

He intended to ask if he seemed to be in good health, but it hit him that it would be faster to see for himself. Holding Kishiar’s clothes draped over his arm tightly, Yuder left Kanna and Steiber behind and ran up the stairs.

“This is Yuder Aile. May I come in?”

Standing at the Commander’s office, knocking and waiting for a response felt like several years. He was trying to suppress his anxiety when, after a moment, the door opened. But the person who appeared was not the expected Nathan Zuckerman, it was Kishiar himself.

“…”

Surprised but at the same time deeply relieved. His heart, which had been anxiously racing, slowed to a steady pace as if it was never agitated. Yuder looked up at Kishiar, who was dressed in white, and slowly scanned his entire body.

He didn’t feel the precariousness he had sensed last time, nor did he feel the uneasy, wild energy. Kishiar was as robust and composed as ever. Only after he was certain of this fact did he discreetly let out a deep sigh.

Given that he had disappeared from the quarters, I wondered where he had gone.

Kishiar, who had similarly been scrutinizing Yuder for a similar length of time, quietly opened his mouth.

“I couldn’t find you at the training ground at the back, or in the dining hall. Where did you go?”

“I stepped out to return something you left behind and ended up assisting with some Sul Division issues.”

“Issues? In such a short time?”

Kishiar, who had responded by raising an eyebrow, took a step back after a moment, uttering an ‘Ah.’

“I was so impatient that I nearly left you outside. Come in and talk.”

Yuder followed the space Kishiar made for him inside. The Commander’s office was no different from usual, but just the fact that the owner had returned and taken his place made it feel strangely different.

“Sit down.”

Kishiar, sitting in front of the guest table, invited Yuder to the seat across from him. As soon as Yuder settled into the chair, he quickly asked the question he was most curious about.

“I heard from Kanna that you’re planning on changing the schedule. May I ask what happened?”

“Just as you heard.”

A brief response from Kishiar was followed by a soft smile passing over his eyes.

“When I woke up this morning, I found it strange that my body felt incredibly light. Up until yesterday, my energy was so rough, I felt rundown. But today, it was peaceful as if a throbbing tooth had been removed. I thought there might be a discrepancy between what I was feeling and reality, so I paid a visit to the palace.”

He had gone to the palace with Nathan Zuckerman in a carriage. Yuder tried to calm the rapid beat of his heart and lightly cleared his throat.

“So…”

“The head court mage and His Majesty’s personal physician both confirmed that my cycle had passed. They assured me that I would soon return to my usual state.”

My God. I really did it.

The mysterious events of the night before, which had happened as if enchanted, passed through his mind in a flash. Yuder, who had unknowingly been gripping his hand tightly, loosened his grip and let out a quiet breath. Not knowing what to say that would seem natural, he hesitated for a moment before finally uttering a sentence.

“I’m truly relieved.”

“Yes, I am too. Not just that my energy has calmed down, but even the early symptoms of the upcoming heat period that I had anticipated have completely subsided, except…”

“…”

Suddenly, it felt like cold water had been poured over his head, leaving him chilled.

‘…The early symptoms of the heat period have subsided?’

“What do you mean by that?”

“This part, honestly, no one can confirm for certain, so I will have to rely on my instinctual judgment. But it’s exactly as I said. Until yesterday, there were signs and a fever that it was coming soon, but today, even that has completely subsided.”

“Could you be mistaken?”

In response to Yuder’s question, Kishiar tilted his head.

“Well… However, I decided that keeping my perfectly healthy body cooped up in my bedroom just to check would be a waste.”

Could such a thing be possible? No. Everything that had happened yesterday was strange, so he should not think about it rationally. Just because his cycle had passed, there was no way that the careful Kishiar would suddenly move up the departure schedule. He had failed to consider that point first, focusing only on the fact that his condition had improved.

‘If I was only trying to deal with the tangled energy mass and accidentally touched the part that was functioning normally…’

Suddenly, his mind felt even colder. Without hesitation, Yuder opened his mouth and called out to him.

“Commander, I…”

“Do you have something to say?”

Kishiar responded as though he was waiting. Yuder bit his lip once, then took a deep breath.

“It seems that what I did last night… may be related to your changed physical condition.”

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Chapter 234

“What happened last night?”

Kishiar countered with a peculiar expression.

“What’s the relevance?”

“Something unusual happened after you suddenly fell asleep yesterday. In fact…”

Yuder was unsure of how Kishiar would take this information, but he continued speaking at a slow pace.

The surge of power that occurred when he had laid his hands on Kishiar to check his condition, the explosion of red energy that resulted, the four powers he had seen clearly like a picture. Recounting all that happened while he was in a half-dazed state was not an easy task.

“Therefore, after exhausting all my energy, I unknowingly fell asleep.”

After finishing his tale, Yuder hesitated for a moment before lowering his head.

“Even though it started from a place of concern, I have no excuse for acting rashly without your permission. I apologize for not telling you as soon as I arrived.”

Kishiar was silent for a moment. Yuder could feel his gaze sternly scrutinizing him from above his bowed head.

“Is that the end of it?”

Kishiar asked.

“As far as I remember, yes.”

“Are you sure there’s nothing more you’re not telling me?”

“Nothing.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

After a moment, Kishiar exhaled deeply. The sound of him leaning back into his chair was audible.

“I see so that’s what happened.”

You, me.

His voice was a mix of complex emotions, even in its flatness. Yuder heard this tone for the first time in his two lifetimes. Fighting the urge to look up at his expression, he remained silent, staring down at his knees. Shortly after, Kishiar’s voice echoed in his ears once more.

“In reality, there are hardly any true coincidences among all miracles that appear to happen by chance. I had a hunch. Even after verifying it at the palace, I thought there must be a reason all the way back. Whether a real fairy visited, or there was a cause I failed to notice.”

””

The word ‘fairy’ resonated strangely in Yuder’s ears, yet he remained silent, only looking down at his knees.

“So, are the spots truly gone?”

“Excuse me? Yes, they are.”

The subject changed abruptly, catching him off guard. Yuder reflexively responded before blinking his eyes in surprise.

“I find it hard to believe. Give me your hand.”

Kishiar extended his hand with an inscrutable expression. Yuder glanced at the hand and slowly clenched his fist.

“If you mean my gloves, I can take them off.”

“Isn’t that unfair? If you manipulated the energy of a sleeping person without permission, then I should be allowed to do the same.”

He didn’t understand the logic, but Kishiar gestured for him to hurry up and extend his hand. Yuder eventually reached out his right hand, covered in a black glove, with an awkward movement. Kishiar, holding his hand elegantly with just his thumb and forefinger, proceeded to pull off the glove. His incredibly slow motion felt as intense as a bee’s sting.

And finally, the back of his hand, marred by a faint bruise-like stain, was revealed.

“You said they were all gone?”

“I had to use my powers to help with the Sul Division issues earlier, so it seems to have spread a bit.”

“I see. So, you used your power there too”

He felt a piercing gaze on his cheek. The grip on his hand tightened, causing his fingertips to shudder momentarily.

“There was no part of it that wasn’t reckless. I don’t know what to say.”

“…I’m sorry.”

“Apologies are not for me to… Never mind. It’s done.”

Kishiar let out a long sigh. Moments later, a white light began to trickle from the hand he held. Once the gently infused power dissipated without pain, a pristine back of the hand was revealed.

“…Commander?”

“I’ve been thinking about what to say… but I can’t come up with anything.”

Yuder cautiously called him, wondering why he exerted energy even when healing from Lusan would have been enough. But instead of an answer, what came back was a completely different statement. Even after the healing was complete, Kishiar continued to hold his hand and slowly spoke.

“It’s surprising to see how much you worried about me. And it’s frustrating how you don’t take care of yourself no matter how much I say… On the one hand, I also feel a bit anxious. It feels strange deep inside my chest.”

What should I do? As his mumbling voice lowered, the touch of his long fingers tracing the now clean back of Yuders hand also slowed down.

“It’s tough.”

A very small violet dot, faintly remaining, shivered as if responding to his whisper.

“…You weren’t angry, were you?”

Swallowing the eerie sensation, Yuder struggled to open his mouth.

“Angry?”

“You mentioned that the early symptoms of the heat period unexpectedly disappeared… Uh.”

For a moment, Yuders words were cut off as the tip of Kishiars finger that was stroking his hand suddenly pressed a little harder on his skin.

“No, that’s not something to get angry about. How can I be mad at someone who acted for my sake? Rather…”

As Kishiar continued to speak while looking into his silent eyes, he turned his face as if to hide the naked expression that seemed to have melted away.

“It’s unbearable to worry so much.”

For a moment, an odd pang of pain brushed past his chest. His crimson gaze skimmed the trace of a spot left on the back of his hand.

“If the same thing happens again as it did last night, would you act the same way without hesitation?”

That wasn’t a question. It was more of a certainty. And because his words were right, Yuder couldn’t easily respond. As Kishiar narrowed his eyes in the silence, confirming his words were correct.

“Didn’t you think it was dangerous?”

“I thought the chance that might not come again was more important.”

“Seriously”

With a sigh, Kishiar raised a hand to his eyes. After a few breaths, he revealed his face again.

“Even so, it was too dangerous. Fortunately, nothing happened this time, but if anything had happened, can you imagine what I would have thought? I probably wouldn’t have been able to forgive myself for seeking you out in such a way yesterday. Compared to that, what does the disappearance of the symptoms of the heat period that didn’t even come matter?”

“No, you can’t say that. That’s”

What Yuder wanted to say was towards him who had appeared after tearing his arm. As he was about to answer, a sudden realization came to him.

‘… Did he bring out this reaction on purpose?’

It felt like an extension of the conversation they had last night.

Watching him stop in mid-sentence, Kishiar met his gaze as if to say ‘Do you understand?’ and firmly opened his mouth.

“That’s right. It’s the same.”

He was saying that the resolve Yuder had to face the unknown for him, the origin of that impulse and desire, exists within him as well.

Distractedly, he quickly averted his gaze, and only then did Kishiar let out a faint laugh.

“So don’t repeat the same thing until we know more about what happened yesterday. Understand? It seems to be not entirely unrelated to me, so I’ll look into it based on the stories you’ve told me today.”

“…Understood.”

Just as it had been before, there was no winning against Kishiar in a war of words.

But if that red light flowed out of his hand again, and once more connected with another power, if he fell back into that dreamy state, filled with strange certainty and entrancing madness, and got the answer he needed…

Could he really resist that impulse?

Especially if it had something to do with Kishiar…

Yuder looked at his hand, still held by Kishiar, and slightly furrowed his brow.

“But, Commander.”

“Hmm.”

“When will you let go of this hand?”

He wanted to put on his glove slowly, but there was no sign of him releasing his held hand. Every time he slowly stroked it, a ticklish sensation arose, as if every hair on his skin was standing up. When he cautiously asked, Kishiar countered without changing his expression.

“Why? The cycle has passed, so I thought it would be okay to touch the approved part freely… Was that just a throwaway comment?”

“…”

It was difficult to respond because he remembered agreeing that it was okay for him to touch, and there was also what happened last night. Watching Kishiar’s fingers slowly stroking even the inside of his palm, Yuder gritted his teeth.

‘No other way…’

“…No. Please continue.”

“Haha.”

However, Kishiar, who Yuder thought would happily continue, instead released his hand with a disappointed smile at his reply. The man looked over Yuder’s puzzled face and lowered his gaze deeply, pressing down his fine eyebrows.

“I’m getting worse, aren’t I?”

“Pardon?”

He didn’t hear well, so he asked again, but Kishiar only smiled and didn’t answer.

‘…At least he doesn’t seem really angry. Should I consider this a blessing?’

Yuder, with a heavy heart, put his glove back on and finally noticed Kishiar’s coat that was still next to him. He had been holding it all this time to return it, and he couldn’t believe he had forgotten it in this short period.

“I…and I will return this as well.”

“Actually, you didn’t have to return it right away.”

“Weren’t you leaving it there for me to bring it back today?”

“There’s no reason to. Why would I torment someone who’s likely exhausted from staying up most of the night with such cryptic nonsense?”

“Then why…”

When Yuder asked back, surprised by his incorrect guess, Kishiar maintained a brief silence, then smiled with his chin propped up.

“Well… Let’s say I just didn’t want to leave it behind.”

He didn’t ask what Kishiar didn’t want to leave behind. The intensity in the gaze he met was already hard to ignore, let alone the thirst that gradually grew more intense. Yuder braced his legs and rose from his seat.

“I see. Understood. Then, I will take my leave.”

At that, Kishiar also stood. Yuder had assumed Kishiar must have some business to attend to as well, but that wasn’t the case.

“Yuder.”

At the call from behind, which sounded as if it was holding something back, he turned his head reflexively. An approaching hand cupped his cheek. As soon as he tilted his head up guided by the cool touch, Kishiar, bending his body, met his lips in a deep kiss.

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Chapter 235

“…”

The same yearning and hunger as before were absent. However, their kiss seemed to convey even deeper emotions.

The surprise gasp that slipped out between his parted lips was sucked back in, sending a shiver down his spine. As he stumbled back, another hand came forward to firmly encase his waist. The heartbeats of both bodies pressed together were indistinguishable. Yuder swallowed the emotions Kishiar continuously fed him, unable to comprehend them.

“How am I supposed to deal with my assistant, who is ready to leave without even a word of thanks?”

His whisper, thin as it was about to break, flowed between their lips.

“How did someone like you appear before me…”

Underneath his lowered eyelashes, his twisted red eyes were too close.

Through his transparent eyes, like mirrors, Yuder could clearly see what expression Kishiar, and he himself, were making, enough to send shivers down his spine.

‘Ah…’

The moment he read the intense longing in his eyes, as if he was looking at light, an indescribably strange emotion welled up. Unable to bear the weight, Yuder bit his lip, only for Kishiar to gently stop

him with another kiss. From within the cheek that he held, heat rose as if a flame had been passed.

Perhaps that's what he felt last night when his hand touched his cheek.

A powerless feeling that he couldn't resist, just by being touched, and a hotter regret than that?

They continued to kiss for an indeterminate amount of time. The deep connection that first seemed to resolve the regret built up over a missed heat period became softer each time they separated and reconnected. In the end, it was as gentle as a small bird pecking, a tingling sensation marking its conclusion.

In the satisfaction and lingering feelings, as if his head was filled with hot water, Yuder, without thinking to wipe his wet lips, rested his head on Kishiar's shoulder, catching his breath. His head was completely blank.

"Today, I received a report that the second prince of Nelarn has arrived in the west. A little ahead of schedule."

Holding Yuder's waist, Kishiar whispered in a somewhat hoarse voice.

"The first expedition will therefore leave tomorrow, moved up in the schedule. Originally it would have been just you and a few others who were already selected, but now the plan has changed."

Kishiar's news about the first expedition team, as Kanna had mentioned, floated vaguely in the heat that had not yet subsided.

"Are you really coming with us?"

"You're too reckless when left alone."

The hand that reached out was unbearably soft, tracing from Yuder's hair, his sweaty nape, to behind his sturdy ear.

"And there's one more fact that I haven't told the others."

"…What is it?"

"Tomorrow, the Emperor plans to publicly announce that I am the owner of the Divine Sword."

A surprise that almost stopped his breath washed over him. Yuder, forgetting even the passion that had just subsided, lifted his head sharply.

"Is that true?"

"Yes. The last trial, mainly for the supporters of the Apeto family, has now ended. There's still an ongoing investigation related to the issue anyway, the time has come."

As he said in front of the wall engraved with the mark of the first Emperors sword. His chest warmed as he recalled the omitted memory.

"Is it okay for you not to be there?"

"It's alright. There's no one here who will simply believe upon hearing the announcement."

Kishiar softly chuckled, gently caressing Yuder's ear.

"So this is also about presenting undeniable evidence."

It seemed that he had already discussed everything with the Emperor earlier that day. Although he didn't go into details, the news Yuder just heard was sufficiently surprising.

Yuder took a deep breath and bowed his head.

“Congratulations.”

“It might be a bit early for congratulations… but thank you.”

Kishiar chuckled in an unusually genuine way, his face honest. Seeing that boyish smile, Yuder suddenly knew that he would never regret what he had done the day before. It was a selfish emotion, surprising even to himself.

“…I should really get going now.”

He had to descend now. There wasn’t much time left for preparation, and yet, for some reason, his body was unwilling to move. It seemed Kishiar felt the same, his fingers playing with Yuder’s hair and ear wouldn’t stop.

“Alright. I should leave.”

Only after giving a firm squeeze to the arm he had been holding and caressing a few more times, did Kishiar finally let go. To cool down his passion, Yuder took a few deep breaths before leaving his final words to Kishiar.

“But, Commander.”

“Hmm?”

“You said I acted recklessly, but you too, Commander, must not take such risks as yesterday. Especially if you are to become the master of the Divine Sword. For me, your safety comes before anything else in any situation. Please consider this when evaluating my actions.”

It seemed Kishiar didn’t expect those words, his eyes slightly widened. Yuder didn’t wait for his response and promptly turned to leave.

During his descent down the staircase, a mix of various feelings ambushed him. Excitement, anxiety, and a lingering warmth intermingled, making it difficult to stay composed. He questioned why the impulse he felt whenever he saw Kishiar only grew stronger the more he indulged it.

—

For the current dispatch mission to the West, Kishiar divided the Cavalry into three groups. The first dispatch team was an elite few tasked with making contact with Nelarn's second prince, Ejain, ensuring his safety and escorting him to the destination. The second dispatch team was to head west a bit later to scout the situation and determine how far the monsters had spread.

The third group was to stay back in the Capital, maintaining the Cavalry. After the first and second dispatch teams joined up, they would decide whether to send the third group based on necessity.

Naturally, Yuder was included in the first dispatch team. Originally, he was supposed to lead the first dispatch team, but Ejain's schedule in the west was earlier than expected, and Kishiar's cycle ended suddenly, causing a change in plans.

"Everyone's here on time."

Under the dim dawn, Kishiar, clad in a deep navy cloak, lightly surveyed the members of the first dispatch team gathered before him, a smile on his face. At his side was Nathan Zuckerman, similarly cloaked, inspecting a few Misty Wind Horses, their hooves cloaked in soundless fog, in a manner that suggested his proficiency with the magic marker for controlling these creatures.

"In order to keep today's agenda a secret, I made up another reason and borrowed those horses, wondering who would care for them it seems Nathan Zuckerman has been taking care of them all along."

Nathan had been appointed to accompany Kishiar on this mission as his adjutant. It was somewhat of a sudden decision, but no tension was apparent on the knight's face.

Yuder glanced at his colleagues standing next to him. The ones selected for the mission had abilities suited to protecting Prince Ejain while demonstrating swift mobility. Kanna, who could comprehend information under any circumstance, Gakane, who could pierce the enemy's weak points by moving his shadow clone silently, Emun Philang from Sul Division, who wielded the power to summon darkness to conceal his body, the Eldore siblings who could teleport short distances instantly, and finally, Lusan, the Priest from the medical division, were selected.

Although most of the members who had been part of the mission to retrieve the Red Stone were present, reducing the overall tension, Emun and Lusan couldn't hide their trembling nerves.

"I wish Enon had come along too… but if he doesn't want to, there's nothing I can do."

In fact, Yuder had asked Enon if he was willing to participate in the mission. However, the response he received was an outright refusal.

"I don't want to. It's not like I have to go. I don't want to leave the capital if I can avoid it. Of course, if you ask me to assist you in the name of Luma's guardian, I would… but I doubt you'd do that."

Yuder, of course, had no intention of forcing him, so he accepted Enon's decision.

However, it seemed that Enon was still bothered by his refusal because he sent a variety of medicinal herbs and helpful drugs through Lusan today. Seeing Lusan's shoulders drooping under the weight of the heavy pouch, Yuder couldn't help but let out a small chuckle.

“He didn’t seem to have any problems when I met him briefly yesterday, so I guess I can trust him.”

During the preparations to leave, what concerned Yuder most was checking his physical condition. There hadn’t been any issues when he fought the Imperial Knights, but his power flowed so smoothly that it was difficult to control, which worried him.

Enon, whom he had briefly met under the pretext of needing wound medicine, swore a bit upon hearing Yuder’s story, but fortunately, he didn’t see any major issues.

“If you don’t want to die soon, stop doing crazy things. Even if you really came from the future, you should at least value your life, shouldn’t you? Is my thinking strange?…”

“Even though the schedule was changed suddenly, I appreciate everyone gathering here. There’s no time for long speeches. You’ve all been briefed on the mission, so let’s move immediately.”

While Yuder was thinking about Enon, Kishiar, who had finished his inspection, started speaking softly. The members clad in black capes all nodded and climbed onto the Misty Wind Horses that were prepared in advance. After Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman had mounted their horses, they dashed out without anyone seeing them off.

“I, I, this is my first time riding a horse.”

Only when they had left the capital in a blink of an eye and the city walls were visible in the distance did Lusan, holding tightly onto the horse’s mane, loosen his grip a bit and speak with a trembling voice.

“This feels so strange. Are you sure it’s okay?”

“Just relax, it’s fine. If you’re tense, they’ll sense it.”

“Really?”

Gakane was running by his side, trying to console him, but Lusan was even more surprised by his words. From behind the Priest, whose eyes were wide as a frightened rabbit’s, the Eldore siblings let out joyous laughter.

“Priest, don’t be scared. Even if you fall off, we’ll catch you.”

“That’s right. We’re really strong, you know.”

Lusan, who had never seen the transformed Eldore siblings, took their reassurance with a grain of salt. Only the other members, who knew the truth of their words, held back their laughter.

The tireless Misty Wind Horses ran at a speed that would have taken over a week if using a carriage or regular horses. With each stretch of their fluid, unruffled bodies, mountains and fields disappeared behind them in the blink of an eye.

Minimizing their meal and sleep times, they kept running, and within two days, they reached the boundary of the region referred to as the West.

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Chapter 236

“The atmosphere here is definitely quite different from where we’ve been,” Kanna said cautiously, after they had passed through several cities and towns in the West.

“Even if people’s expressions seem normal, there’s a tension that’s palpable everywhere.”

Even without Kanna’s ability to read information, Yuder could see that the Western regions were unmistakably on edge. It wasn’t yet the period when monsters were massively emerging within the country’s borders, but it seemed that news of damage from other countries had reached them piecemeal.

“Especially during such times, planning to pass through the Great Sarain Forest… the second prince of Nelarn must truly be desperate.”

‘Indeed, even if he didn’t know, his life and throne were at stake…’

Yuder responded silently to Kanna’s words, focusing on the muffled sound of hooves hitting the ground as their Misty Wind Horse galloped on. They had planned to reach a small town to meet with Prince Ejain by nightfall, but for some reason, the sky had started to cloud over a few hours earlier and was growing steadily darker.

“It’s become cloudier than before, hasn’t it? We should reach our destination before it starts raining.”

Lusan, the Priest who had been following closely behind Yuder, initiated a conversation with a loud voice, seemingly noticing his surveying of the sky. Unlike the others, who still had energy despite

days without proper rest and continuous riding, Lusan looked extremely drained. He would've likely fainted if he had been riding a regular horse.

"Yes, but there's no need to worry too much."

"Haha… I suppose. I'm not worried. What could concern me when I'm traveling with such extraordinary people?"

Rubbing under his tired eyes, Lusan gave a wry smile. Turning away from Lusan's face, heavy with the desire to arrive and rest as soon as possible, Yuder glanced at the edge of the dark cloak of the person leading their party at the front.

To an unfamiliar observer, Kishiar seemed untiring as he rode his horse without showing any signs of exhaustion, it might have appeared that his previous sickness and rest were a lie. Guided by the direction-indicating magic tool bracelet on one arm, Kishiar moved forward without hesitation, the tip of his sheathed divine sword, Orr, rhythmically swaying to assert its presence.

'Has the Emperor made the announcement as planned?'

Kishiar had secretly mentioned the day before they left that the Emperor was planning to announce the new owner of the Divine Sword. However, during the more than two days of traveling to the West, Yuder hadn't heard any related follow-up news or rumors.

That was only to be expected, considering they had been riding non-stop, leaving no chance to hear any news. Yet, Yuder found himself increasingly curious and bothered each time he saw the Divine Sword at Kishiar's waist.

'While he himself doesn't seem to care at all, why am I…'

"Everyone, let's stop for a moment."

Then, Kishiar, who was leading at the front, raised his hand, signaling them to halt. As the entire party came to a stop, he pointed towards the horizon, where only the vast plains could be seen, and opened his mouth.

“There seems to be some movement over there, what does everyone think?”

“…”

Yuder turned his head toward the direction Kishiar pointed. Narrowing his eyes and focusing, he could indeed see something shimmering and moving in the distance.

“If it were the energy of the Awakener, it would have appeared clearer… What is that? A monster?”

“It seems like… monsters are fighting with humans.”

Gakane cautiously answered, his companions apparently sharing his thought.

“It sounds similar to the clashing of weapons.”

Nathan Zuckerman, a swordmaster, agreed.

“It seems so to me as well. Let’s go and see. Everyone, be careful and follow.”

They slightly diverted from their original direction and spurred their horses. Soon, the indistinct figures in the distance began to clarify.

“Ah!”

“Run… quickly…!”

A handful of people were wrestling and tumbling on the ground to evade long, sharp objects jutting out from the earth. Bags and other belongings were scattered in disarray, and a few individuals, either injured or dead, lay nearby. The direness of the situation was beyond their expectations, prompting them to dismount immediately.

“What should we do, Commander?”

“We must save them first.”

In response to Yuder’s question, Kishiar, without hesitation, took a look around and issued orders.

“Emun. Gakane. Use shadows and darkness to conceal the survivors and bring them to us.”

“Yes!”

“Kanna, get information from those we rescue. Priest Lusan, please provide healing. And Hinn, Finn, Yuder, and Nathan, hold off those monsters. You don’t have to kill them, just buy time until all survivors are rescued. Understood?”

“Understood.”

Yuder leapt off his horse and sprinted, stepping on the wind.

“Ah, Yuder. It’s unfair that you’re going first!”

He heard the Eldore siblings, bickering and following behind him as he ran, stepping on the wind as if hopping on stepping stones. Gakane’s shadow followed swiftly behind him. As Yuder arrived at the battleground, he grabbed the arm of a man who nearly got pierced by something jumping out from the ground, then leaped high into the air.

“Ah!”

The man, who was abruptly lifted into the air by Yuder, screamed with his eyes shut tight.

“Save the people!”

Yuder felt as though he had heard that voice somewhere before.

‘Strange. Where have I seen him? In my past life?… No, that’s not it.’

In such cases, his intuition was usually correct. Landing on the ground, Yuder shook the trembling man’s shoulder.

“Compose yourself. We are here to rescue you. What’s your name?”

“Me, Me, Melbon Clant….”

The man somehow understood they were there to rescue him. He curled up, whispering his name in a very small voice.

‘Melbon Clant?… Melbon… Melbon, huh.’

“Ah.”

As he repeated the name, a memory sparked in his mind like a bright flame. The face of the somewhat disoriented servant who had come looking for Prince Ejain while he was walking in the palace garden.

The man Yuder had saved was the same servant he had briefly encountered at that time.

“Do you know the Second Prince of Nelarn?”

“How do you know that!”

The man was taken aback, his head jerking up. Fear and caution clouded his battered, bloodied face.

“I have seen you briefly at the Imperial Palace before. Do you remember?”

“Im…Imperial Palace, you say? My memory is a bit…”

“Would you remember if I say I’m a member of the Cavalry?”

A tremendous sound erupted from behind, where the Eldore siblings were exercising their abilities. At that moment, Melbon gasped, swallowing a groan, and his eyes widened in surprise.

“Aha! I remember now! That time, in the garden, when I saw the lost prince…!”

“Correct.”

“The Cavalry. I heard we’re about to meet with them…”

Despite his stuttering, a look of joy spread across Melbon’s face as he repeatedly exclaimed ‘Oh my!’

“Yes, that’s us. But what on earth has happened here?”

At Yuder’s question, Melbon quickly grabbed his hand.

“We encountered assassins on the way! We managed to handle them, but something must have been triggered during the process, and monsters started leaping out of the ground. And, but the prince… Our prince is still over there. Please, save him before me!”

Yuder glanced toward the direction Melbon had pointed. As the Eldore siblings and Nathan fought with what looked like tails sprouting out of the ground, he saw someone struggling to get up in the distance.

‘Oh no.’

“Understood. You should go ahead.”

Gakane’s shadow swiftly approached them. Thinking the shadow was a monster, Melbon screamed. Yuder quickly handed him over to the shadow and turned around.

“Arrgh!”

Ignoring the sound of Melbon flailing in the arms of the mere shadow, Yuder took another leap into the air. As he momentarily hovered, the situation below became clear.

The movements of the people, the attacking monster, and even the current location of Prince Ejain.

‘From here it’s clear. That monster is undoubtedly attacking by extending its tail from the body hidden underground.’

It was a monster he had faced a few times in his previous life. It wasn’t recorded in the monster book because it rarely showed itself. It lived by hunting with its long, sturdy black tail, usually satisfied with plants, and rarely preyed on humans. However, if its body hidden deep underground was provoked, things changed. The body, much smaller and weaker than the tail, was its weakness.

‘It seems like Prince Ejain and his party touched where its body was buried while dealing with the assassins.’

In dealing with the monster, one shouldn’t focus on the tail. It was crucial to expose the body first and attack it for a swift defeat.

Yuder etched all the information clearly in his mind and stretched his hand downwards.

“Everyone, back off!”

And as he descended, he conjured a massive force.

With a deafening wind noise, his clothes and hair fluttered wildly. The land below, reacting to the power flowing from Yuder's hand, erupted upwards, creating multiple hollows. As soft grass and gentle soil scattered in all directions, someone screamed.

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Chapter 237

“What on earth are you doing!”

Nathan Zuckerman wore a baffled expression. Rather than responding, Yuder finished landing and sprinted towards Ejain, leaving behind a single phrase.

“Attack the main body, not the tail.”

“What! Something came out from the ground!”

“What’s that? It looks like a sphere, and it’s connected to a tail?”

The Eldore siblings had just managed to find the main body burrowed in the ground, conjuring up their magic stones.

‘Now that they’ve found the main body, they can handle the rest.’

Ejain was lying a bit further from where Yuder had last seen him. His body was a mess; he must not have evaded the piles of dirt properly.

“Are you the Second Prince of Nelarn?”

Even from the silver strands of hair alone, it was clear that he was Ejain. However, Yuder approached and asked out of courtesy. Ejain groaned and lifted his head in response to Yuder’s voice. His face was smeared with blood, as if his forehead had been torn open.

“You are… that… from the imperial garden back then?”

“Yes. The one from the Cavalry.”

“Yuder… Aile. Right.”

Surprisingly, Ejain remembered Yuder's name correctly.

"Yes, that's correct."

"What happened? The presence of the Cavalry here…"

"I am a member of the first dispatched Cavalry sent to escort you, Your Highness. We happened upon this monster attack while on our way to the rendezvous point."

Yuder never expected to run into Prince Ejain and his party in such a place. Upon hearing Yuder's indifferent response, a faint smile crossed Ejain's face as the hard lines of his wary expression faded.

"… Astonishing. I thought I was going to die, but not only did I survive, I ran into you again, in this way. It seems God hasn't abandoned me yet."

"Are you able to stand up?"

"Yes, if you could help a bit."

Yuder helped Ejain to his feet by draping the prince's arm over his shoulder. As Ejain leaned on Yuder and staggered, he glanced at the churned earth and the fallen monster and his eyes widened.

"Did you defeat it?"

"Yes."

"We couldn't even scratch it despite our numerous attempts… how did you manage?"

"Every monster has a weakness. The weakness of this monster is the main body buried in the ground. Unless you attack that, it cannot be brought down."

“I see… So, that’s why…”

Ejain, sounding rather resigned, began to step forward, then grimaced with pain, biting his lip.

“Argh…”

“Did you injure your foot?”

“I can walk. I’m okay.”

One of his ankles was bloodied, but Ejain stubbornly tried to keep walking. His previously calm expression was replaced by the fleeting shadow of a wounded pride. Ignoring this, Yuder spoke.

“Don’t push yourself. Stay still. A shadow that can transport you will arrive soon. Please endure until then.”

“A shadow?”

“Yes, it’s my colleague’s ability. Using it, you can travel without any jostling and arrive safely at the rendezvous.”

Upon hearing Yuder’s response, Ejain was silent for a moment.

“…I envy you.”

“Pardon?”

“Even though I’ve trained enough to gather some aura and received praise for my talent with the sword, all I felt was frustration against that monster. But the power you and your companions have, to deal with such a creature so easily…”

It was a power that had come to him without effort, yet it was incredibly potent. Jealousy radiated from Ejain’s eyes.

“…”

Not knowing how to respond, Yuder opted for silence. After a moment, Ejain gave a bitter smile, his mysterious purple eyes twinkling.

“I apologize. That was not something I should have said to the person who saved my life.”

“No, it’s fine.”

“I’ve thought this before, but you… you seem like a really good person.”

Yuder Aile, a good person? If the knights from the Imperial Knights, whom he had soundly thrashed not too long ago, heard this, they’d be astounded. Regardless of his perplexing expression, Ejain looked down at Yuder’s shoulder that was propping him up, and continued speaking.

“Perhaps our encounter is a matter of fate, going beyond mere fortune…”

“Pardon?”

“I don’t mean it in a weird way.”

Ejain quickly added, concerned that Yuder might misunderstand.

“I just think that us crossing paths twice now might suggest some powerful connection between us.”

The first to detect this crisis situation was Kishiar. So if it’s a matter of fate, wouldn’t that fate be between Ejain and Kishiar? Yuder decided not to explain this, fearing it might upset the bleeding prince.

‘He must be disoriented from losing so much blood. The shock must be significant… He needs medical attention soon.’

Just then, Gakane's shadow approached rapidly, allowing Ejain to receive treatment shortly.

"Prince!"

The moment they returned to where Kishiar, Kanna, Gakane, and Lusan were, Melbon, bandaged in various places, rushed over with a pained expression.

"I'm so relieved you're safe. By God… God has watched over us. Thank you. But the amount of blood you've lost… Oh my goodness."

"I see you're safe too, Melbon."

"Yes, thankfully, these people saved me. Jen and Feyti are safe too, so don't worry too much."

Tears welling in his eyes, Melbon wiped them with his sleeve.

"Priest. Priest. This man is our prince. Please, tend to his wounds…!"

"Understood."

While in the middle of healing others, Lusan rushed over to examine Ejain's condition.

"Fortunately, your injuries are not severe. Receive a bit of divine power and rest for a day or two, and you should recover quickly."

Lusan carefully cleaned the blood from Ejain's face, ankles, and other parts with a wet cloth, then used his divine power. In no time, Ejain was able to stand on his own, looking pale but otherwise recovered.

"Thank you. It's fortunate to meet such a skilled Priest here."

"You flatter me."

As Lusan scratched his head and looked down, blushing, Ejain bowed his head in thanks.

“No, it’s us who should thank you for healing me and my men.”

“Prince Ejain.”

At that moment, Kishiar, who had been nearby, approached. The atmosphere changed instantly at the arrival of the man with extraordinary appearance and physique.

“It’s the first time we are having a personal conversation. I am Kishiar La Orr, the Commander of the Cavalry and the Duke of Peletta, here to assist with this incident.”

Ejain stared at Kishiar’s extended hand for a moment before quietly accepting it.

“I am Ejain Afnan Nelarn, the Second Prince of Nelarn. I was well aware of your reputation, Duke, and that of your Cavalry. We owe you a great debt this time.”

“I came here to help, so it’s only natural I did my part. I’m just glad we didn’t arrive too late.”

After the gentle exchange of pleasantries, the two men released each other’s hands. Yuder, who had never seen the two men meet in his previous life, was momentarily captivated by the sight of their smiling faces greeting each other.

“Yuder, Yuder. That’s the Second Prince of Nelarn, right?”

But he had no time to be absorbed in contemplation. Kanna, who had appeared late, asked him a question in a whisper, her face bright with excitement. This prompted Yuder to promptly withdraw his gaze from the fascinating scene.

“Yes.”

“Wow. I saw him from a distance at the party before, but I didn’t realize how mysterious his eye color is up close. It’s beautiful, like a gem.”

The lilac-colored eyes passed down through generations of the Nelarn royal family were not clearly visible from a distance. Only when viewed up close did they reflect the light, shining like amethysts.

“Aren’t you amazed, Yuder?”

“Not really.”

Even if they were mysterious, they were still parts of a human body, just like his own. He didn’t find it particularly noteworthy.

While Yuder watched Kishiar and Ejain conversing, Gakane also approached and stood by his side. He looked worn out from having used his shadow clone to transport not only the injured but also the bodies of the monsters and others who had fallen in the vicinity.

“You were both here.”

“Gakane, have you finished moving everything?”

When Kanna asked, her eyes wide, Gakane nodded.

“Yes.”

“You must be exhausted. Go and get some healing from the Priest.”

“I’m more worried that Yuder might have hurt himself using his powers.”

Despite being likely the most exhausted among them, Gakane was concerned for Yuder.

“I’m okay.”

Yuder reassured him before adding that he should go and get healed. Gakane cast a worried glance at Yuder’s gloved hand before turning away.

“Now, we should prepare to leave soon. We must protect Prince Ejain and his entourage cautiously until we reach our destination. From now on, two people will ride on each Misty Wind Horse.”

Not long after, Kishiar concluded his conversation with Ejain and issued new orders to his men. It was a command for them to share their horses temporarily to protect Prince Ejain and his party, who had lost all their horses and carriages in the chaos.

The men dismounted their horses and welcomed their new companions. The surviving entourage of Prince Ejain rode with Gakane, Kanna, and Emun, while the Eldore siblings naturally ended up riding together.

And Yuder found himself face-to-face once again with Prince Ejain, whose eyebrows were lowered in a playful smile.

“Here I am, in your debt again. I appreciate your assistance.”

“The pleasure is mine.”

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Chapter 238

Yuder extended his hand to aid Ejain in mounting his horse, his expression carefully unread. The gaze of the young prince had settled far more calmly than when they had met moments ago. Despite still being under the shock of the sudden battle and his injuries, his composure and hardened demeanor swiftly masked his vulnerability. Truly, he was an extraordinary talent.

“I heard from His Highness the Duke… or should I say, Cavalry Commander, that your position is Assistant to the Commander?”

As Yuder contemplated this, Ejain, too, seemed to harbor a question for him.

“Yes.”

“For such a young man to have already received a last name, you must be an exceptionally gifted individual.”

“Not at all.”

“You need not be so modest. Isn’t it something to be proud of, having such exceptional abilities?”

“There are many others here who have also received a last name.”

Upon hearing this casual reply, Ejain expressed surprise, as he was unaware of this. He had heard of Yuder while conversing with Kishiar, but he had not received any information about the rest of the Cavalry members.

“Then, how should I address you? Sir Aile? Assistant Aile?”

“Either way is fine. Please address me as you see fit.”

In his past life, he was addressed as Commander Aile, but now, he was not the Commander of the Cavalry.

“Hmm. Then… Yuder?”

Yuder, for a moment, almost clenched the mane of his Misty Wind Horse too tightly, and glanced back. Ejain wore an innocent smile, making Yuder question if he had heard wrong.

“I want to get to know you better, since you’re the one who saved my life. If it’s difficult for you, just tell me.”

How could he refuse when the prince himself wishes to address him so?

Moreover, Ejain was not just a prince of a minor country. If things were to go the way they did in his past life, he was to become one of the best military leaders on the continent, the sprout of an emperor, and an Awakener who would have great power. Yuder, too, did not particularly want to keep his distance from such a person.

‘In order to prepare for a future that may yet again repeat itself…’

Even though Ejain from his previous life did not readily believe or assist when Yuder warned that the world was headed towards its end, he was still a person who tried to prevent his death by evaluating his abilities till the very end.

Yuder, for the first time in a while, found himself calculatingly indifferent.

“…No, either is fine with me.”

“Good. Then Yuder it is.”

Ejain chuckled.

“I find it rewarding to exchange conversations with the one who saved my life, thus why I switched places with Melbon.”

‘Switched places?’

Apparently, Ejain seemed to have developed a stronger fondness for Yuder, who had saved him. Yuder, feeling a substantial amount of pressure, was at a loss for words.

‘I do question whether he would still show such fondness if I was the one who was covered in dirt… His curiosity and envy of the Awakeners are so large, it’s probably why he behaves this way.’

“Yuder. Do you remember the last thing we talked about the day we first met?”

“What are you referring to?”

“That’s disappointing. We promised to talk more about the Awakeners.”

“Ah…”

While Ejain had indeed made a similar one-sided declaration, Yuder didn’t recall making any reply to it. Yet, it seemed as though the recollection had somehow changed in Ejain’s mind. Yuder remained silent, but the young prince continued regardless.

“I had planned to visit the Cavalry for sightseeing once, but an unexpected return home hindered me. You have no idea how regretful I was. But seeing we’ve met again like this, I guess fate is indeed fate.”

“Is that so?”

“Was your presence in the imperial garden due to your assistant duties?”

Yuder paused for a moment, turning his gaze naturally to avoid being caught off guard.

“Yes, well…”

The truth was, he had stayed in the palace for a few days due to an unexpected manifestation of the second gender, but he could not openly admit that.

‘I hope he doesn’t ask any more about this.’

“Then, later on…”

As Ejain, oblivious to Yuder’s inner thoughts, was about to continue, suddenly Kishiar’s voice came from ahead.

“Prince Ejain.”

His call was as gentle as always, but firm enough to interrupt the conversation.

“My adjutant has reported, as he said earlier, that the inspection of the assassins’ bodies has been completed. They indeed left no significant evidence. Is it okay if we erase the traces and leave now?”

“Ah, yes, of course.”

Thanks to his timely intervention, the conversation with Ejain did not continue. Yuder silently felt grateful and looked at Kishiar. As if he had been waiting for this moment, Kishiar’s eyes precisely met his.

“…”

After a moment, Kishiar slightly squinted his eyes and lifted the corners of his lips, then turned his head again, so subtly that others would find it hard to notice.

‘…What?’

Yuder blinked, staring blankly at him before finally realizing the meaning behind his actions. Kishiar’s interruption hadn’t been coincidental. He had intentionally intervened to prevent the conversation with Ejain from progressing in a direction that could be uncomfortable for Yuder.

‘Ah…’

While he had been busy receiving the last reports and inspecting the site before leaving, he managed to keep track of even the small conversations here. It seemed unbelievable, but it was indeed possible for Kishiar. Nobody except Nathan Zuckerman and Yuder knew that he could read the movements of those passing outside even while lying behind closed doors.

‘Did he know I was uncomfortable talking about the second gender manifestation and help me out?’

The thought made a strange surge rise from deep within his chest.

“Now, as the last member is on the horse, let’s erase the traces and leave. Yuder.”

“Yes.”

As soon as Nathan Zuckerman, who had completed his inspection of the scene, lightly mounted the horse behind Priest Lusan, Kishiar reached out and called Yuder.

“I leave the rest to you.”

“Understood.”

It didn’t take long to erase all traces of battle and deeply bury the bodies with his earth-moving abilities. Yuder accomplished all this in an instant without moving a single finger.

As the trembling ground swallowed the bodies of the monsters and assassins, pulling them deep beneath the surface and smoothly flattening out, the people from Nelarn let out a mixed gasp of fear and admiration.

“Whew…”

Later, if someone came here and tried to dig up any traces, it would be almost impossible to find the deeply buried bodies with human strength. Yuder checked that the ground, previously torn up by the aftermath of the battle, had been neatly restored and then withdrew his power.

“It’s done.”

“Good.”

Kishiar, after a quick survey of the surroundings, nodded in satisfaction.

“Let’s move out now. It looks like it might rain on the way, so everyone, be careful.”

The Misty Wind Horse that Nathan, who was leading the other horses, rode stood at the forefront, followed immediately by the one Kishiar was on. Yuder, being with Prince Ejain, who was the most important person in this mission, maintained a position that did not deviate from the center, keeping a lookout around them.

The Misty Wind Horses quickly moved away from the land where the battle had taken place, advancing without hesitation. The long hair of Prince Ejain, who was sitting behind Yuder, occasionally brushed against the side of his face.

“Speaking of which…”

After a long silence, Prince Ejain suddenly murmured from behind.

“Wasn’t your ability to fly? Melbon said so.”

“I don’t have the ability to fly. It seems you felt that way seeing me treading the air using the wind.”

“Wind?”

Prince Ejain, after a brief counter-question, fell silent for a moment, then let out a voice unable to hide his astonishment.

“So does that mean you have more than one ability?”

“Yes.”

It was okay to say this much, as he would eventually see Yuder using his powers while carrying out this mission. Besides controlling wind and earth, he could freely handle four elements, including fire and water, and there were several other peculiarities, but Yuder did not initially mention them in detail.

“It takes decades of training for mages to properly control a single attribute It’s incredibly hard to believe. Is it common among the Awakeners?”

“Unlike mages, it’s hard to think the same, but even here, it won’t be too common.”

“I see. Right”

At the time, there were hardly any people in the Cavalry who could use multiple abilities. Yuder was the only one who could handle several natural attributes. However, he knew this wouldn’t always be the case.

As time passed, some would develop the abilities they initially possessed, gaining new power that seemed completely different from before. There would also be Awakeners who were born with more than one power.

And Prince Ejain, who was expressing his astonishment at Yuder's abilities from behind him, was one such Awakener in his previous life.

'The silver king followed by six stars. Guardian of the barrier.'

Yuder recalled Ejain's nickname from his past life and then erased it from his mind.

""

Prince Ejain was silent for a while. He spoke again when Yuder used his power to gently bend the rough branches that could hit their faces while rushing through the forest, like drawing a curtain aside.

"…I had been curious about the Cavalry before coming to the empire, but seeing and hearing directly, it feels like the information I had was an understatement."

The sigh Prince Ejain breathed out rang long in Yuder's ears.

"The more I know, the more I realize how remarkable it is."

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Chapter 239

Before they reached their original destination, a small city, the murky sky began to pour rain. The Cavalry members flipped over the hats attached to their uniforms, and the people of Nelarn wrapped their cloaks around them to keep their heads from getting wet.

Although the rain was unpleasant, it had its benefits. Due to the fewer visitors, the city had far fewer guards than usual who would have normally kept a keen watch.

“The Red Butterfly Knights dispatched for the mission from the Pearl Tower…and the mercenaries hired as assistants… Alright. Identity cards and certificates, all verified. You may enter.”

The guards, standing by the gate where the rain was relentless, hastily checked the counterfeit identity card Nathan handed them and declared a quick passage. No one paid any attention to the unique appearance of the Misty Wind Horse as they entered the city, as there was no one out in the rain.

“We originally planned to take a detour by using the mountain near the back door, but the rain has made things much easier.”

Kishiar, whose conspicuous appearance was deeply hidden by a cloak and hat, said in a cool mutter. They soon arrived at a dilapidated mansion located in a hardly visible part of the city.

“This place is….”

“This is a safe house prepared in advance by the Peletta Knights who were dispatched to the West for this mission.”

Nathan Zuckerman kindly answered Kanna’s murmur, dismounted, and opened the mansion door.

“Please go in. I will take the horses to a safe place and then follow.”

Everyone dismounted and entered the mansion. The inside smelled of stale dust as if it had not been taken care of for a long time, but it was spacious enough to accommodate several people.

“Welcome, Duke. We received your message and have been waiting.”

Two men who revealed themselves from inside knelt in front of Kishiar and saluted him knight-style. They were undoubtedly members of the Peletta Knights, as could be seen from the sword at their waist and the formal demeanor, despite their casual clothes.

“We thought something happened because you were late. We’re really glad you made it safely.”

“We had a bit of a situation in the middle. You guys must have had a hard time.”

Kishiar, who briefly commended the knights’ efforts, turned his head and smiled at Prince Ejain’s party.

“I understand that we can’t afford any delays, but it would be difficult to discuss the main issue with wet bodies. Let’s have a meal and rest for a while before we start the discussion. Would that be alright?”

“Of course.”

Ejain swept back his wet hair and responded firmly. The party was led to their rooms for the night by the Peletta knights. Yuder was assigned the room next to Kishiar, as he was the Commander’s assistant. Judging by the two beds in the room, the other bed seemed to be for Nathan Zuckerman, who had not returned yet.

He looked at the bed, seemingly after a long time, then lowered his gaze towards the end of his still-dripping cloak.

‘It’s a relief that only the cloak got wet…’

After taking off the wet cloak and hanging it on the wall, he sat on the bed and took off the glove on his right hand. He had used his strength all day, so it was natural that his spots had spread quite a bit.

‘But the color is almost… barely visible as a slight red.’

He clenched and unclenched his fist. There was no pain to be found. It seemed he could forego immediate medical treatment.

‘Although I still feel that my strength is being amplified more than usual, it hasnt interfered with my work.

Simply put, one could be pleased that he’d become stronger than before, having absorbed the power of Kishiar. However, Yuder couldn’t help but harbor a strange feeling of unease.

It seemed unwise to feel pleased about a sensation of continuous change within his body.

“Sir Aile, are you in there?”

At that moment, a knock resounded from outside.

“Yes. Please come in.”

After slipping on his gloves and answering, the door opened to reveal the face of Nathan Zuckerman.

“Dinner will soon be prepared. Please accompany the Duke. I have some business with the Peletta Knights and will not be able to join you for dinner, but will leave immediately.”

“Understood.”

“Oh, and”

Just as he seemed about to turn away, Nathan paused, then turned back to Yuder.

“I had something I wanted to ask earlier but didn’t get the chance. May I ask it now?”

“Go ahead.”

From his questioning look, Yuder could guess what he might ask. After hearing Yuder’s concise reply, Nathan Zuckerman lowered his voice and continued his question.

“How did you know that the weak point of the monster we defeated earlier was the body buried beneath its tail? The monster guide taught by the Cavalry does not contain such information, nor was it a monster known from the data we’ve collected… No matter how I think about it, it seemed as if you knew beforehand.”

As expected, that was the question. Yuder let out a small breath and gave the answer he had prepared beforehand.

“That’s because I did know beforehand.”

Surprise flickered in Nathan’s eyes.

“You knew? But how?”

“I had encountered that monster before I joined the Cavalry.”

“Ah”

“From that experience, I learned about the monster’s body and weak point. At that time, due to my limited experience, I didn’t realize

how rare that monster was Today, seeing it again, it reminded me. You know I have good eyes.”

This was not entirely a lie. In a sense, having encountered the monster in his previous life did count as meeting it before joining the Cavalry, and Yuder was naturally good at identifying the weak points of monsters he saw for the first time. As he couldn’t directly use his power against monsters, he relied heavily on observation. This skill was the result of that practice.

“But, thanks to your quick memory recall, we were able to defeat the monster without anyone getting hurt. What a relief.”

“…”

Nathan was silenced by Yuder’s audacious yet irrefutable argument. Yuder saw the suspicion gradually disappear from the earnest knight’s eyes, replaced by the usual tranquility.

“Certainly With Sir Aile’s abilities, even before joining the Cavalry, you probably could have defeated a few dozen monsters. I understand. I must have asked an unnecessary question.”

I’m sorry, Sir Zuckerman. If I were my past self, defeating a few dozen monsters alone before joining the Cavalry would have been beyond even my wildest dreams Yuder swallowed the answer he could not yet reveal and remained silent.

“Thank you for your answer.”

After Nathan left, Yuder quietly counted to ten in his mind. Standing, he opened the door to check if Nathan Zuckerman was still around. There was no sign of him.

‘Can’t be helped. I can’t allow my allies to be hurt by keeping my knowledge to myself, but neither can I admit to having known everything from the beginning…’

The most plausible excuse he could offer was that he'd learned everything before joining the Cavalry.

While contemplating when he should reveal his own weaknesses, the savory scent of soup wafted in from a distance.

Wow, it's been ages since I've smelled real food."

"My stomach feels like it's going to burst."

The members, with their uncanny ability to detect delicious smells, bolted out of the door across the hallway. Having cleaned up from the rain and taken a brief rest, their expressions were notably brighter than before.

"Yuder! Let's go eat together!"

"I have to accompany the Commander. You go ahead."

"Can't you eat if the Commander doesn't? It wasn't like this back in the headquarters."

"I'm on duty now… and I'm the Commander's assistant."

There was also Nathan Zuckerman's request, but he decided to omit that.

"I'd never be able to resist!"

"I'm so glad I'm not an assistant!"

As if they sympathized with the woes of an assistant who had to accompany the Commander at all times, the Eldore siblings jovially patted Yuder on the back and then hurried down the hallway. Following them, Gakane and Kanna also patted Yuder's shoulder with regretful expressions, each leaving a whispered message.

"Yuder, do you want me to stay with you?"

“Even if there’s something delicious, I’ll save some for you.”

“…It’s okay. Thank you, both of you.”

Surely, the food wouldn’t run out before the Commander, Kishiar, got to eat, but their words still warmed his heart. Yuder momentarily forgot about his cold deliberations, responding to his comrades with a smile.

“Commander, it’s time for dinner.”

Even when all the members had left for their meal, Kishiar did not leave his room. After waiting for a bit, Yuder knocked on his bedroom door.

“Commander, may I come in?”

Again, there was no response. With no other choice, he carefully opened the door and stepped inside. There sat a man, staring blankly at a map under the lamplight at the table, showing only his side profile.

“Commander?”

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“Commander?”

“…Ah.”

Only then did Kishiar, having blinked once, shifted his gaze to see Yuder’s face and paused momentarily.

“When did you arrive?”

“Mealtime was upon us. I knocked repeatedly but received no response, so I let myself in.”

“Has it gotten that late already?”

“Do you perhaps not feel well?”

It wasn’t normal for such a sharp man to be oblivious to the sound of knocking. It seemed his choice to push his body to the limits, heading west as soon as his duties ended, might have been overzealous. Yuder, carefully observing Kishiar’s face, asked cautiously. Kishiar shook his head slightly, a faint smile gracing his features.

“No, I’m fine. I was just deep in thought, more so than I realized.”

Yuder sneakily peeked at the map Kishiar had been looking at.

‘… It seems to be a map of the West… what are these red markings all over?’

But before he could inspect it more closely, Kishiar completely folded the map. Yuder realized that if it was an important matter, he

would come to know of it eventually without having to ask. So he withdrew his interest from the map.

“You must be hungry. If I didn’t respond, you should have eaten first. I recall no strict rule that everyone must wait for me to start eating.”

“I’m not particularly hungry, and of course, your mealtime takes priority, Commander. I was worried about your health.”

“Ah… I see. Was it Nathan who asked you to check on me?”

The man, quick to comprehend the situation, rose from his seat.

“Alright. Let’s go eat.”

“Yes.”

“Weren’t you tired on your journey? You must have used a lot of your abilities.”

Kishiar asked as he opened the door and walked out. Yuder followed behind him.

“Actually, I was so energetic that it became a problem, so I’m fine.”

Although it was a sincere answer, Kishiar chuckled as if he found something amusing.

“Is that so? You seemed like you might be feeling trapped while at the headquarters. To the point where I thought you might have felt liberated using your abilities freely without restrictions or pain outside for the first time in a while.”

It was true that he felt a sense of freedom, being able to use his abilities outside without any constraints or pain. However, he had

never felt as if he was doing something he didn’t want to do out of obligation while at the headquarters.

‘Did I show any signs of disliking my work recently?’ Yuder hesitated briefly before responding slowly.

“I didn’t feel that way… Did you notice anything strange about my behavior?”

“No. Nothing was amiss.”

Kishiar responded in his usual tone.

“The problem always lies with me.”

It was an ambiguous answer, seeming like a joke and not, making it difficult to discern his intentions. As Yuder pondered whether he should ask about the meaning behind those words, Kishiar suddenly stopped in his tracks.

“Hold on.”

“Commander?”

Kishiar, who had halted abruptly, reached out toward Yuder’s head and plucked something from the hair. What he had assumed to be a speck of dust was, upon closer inspection, a silver strand of hair. It must have attached itself during their journey, where Yuder rode the horse together with Ejain.

“It was bothering me.”

“You should have just told me.”

His body, left unclean and even soaked in rain, was bound to have more than just a single strand of Ejain’s hair stuck to it. That Kishiar would directly pick something from there without hesitation was not a typical act for a member of the imperial family.

At this rate, there will truly be no words to say if I'm arrested for insulting an imperial family member one day.

But the problem was that, unlike before, he didn't vehemently avoid it. Yuder quietly lowered his gaze and followed behind him as if nothing had happened.

"Speaking of which, you seemed to be conversing quite a bit with the Second Prince of Nelarn while riding together."

"Yes."

"From what I heard, he seemed to have taken quite a liking to you since the time you encountered each other in the palace… but how did you find him on your journey?"

Was he asking about how Yuder felt about Ejain?

Yuder reflected on the conversation he had with Ejain while riding. He had dEmunstrated a diplomatic skill capable of gaining the cooperation of Emperor Keilusa, despite still being a prince. He was curious about Yuder, especially after having seen him several times up close, but he didn't have much to say.

The conversation with Ejain today was nothing but remarks about how he envied the Awakeners and felt the Cavalry was underestimated. Most of Yuder's impression of Ejain was biased toward the memories and information from his past life. If he wiped those out, nothing would remain.

"…Just as when I first met him, he seemed to still hold great interest in the Cavalry and the Awakeners. He said he had been interested in the Cavalry even before coming to the Empire."

"And?"

What else was he supposed to say?

He couldn’t possibly say that he’d become a powerful Awakener, one of the few in the future, and that his power would make Nelarn a nation strong enough to compete with the Orr Empire.

He also couldn’t mention the fact that he saw glimpses of Ejain’s character even at this point, a character that valued talent and extended a helping hand to Yuder, who was facing execution. Yuder tried his best to recall only his encounter with Ejain today.

“Despite being injured, he quickly shook off the shock and stood up, showing a strong character.”

“Hmm. Anything else?”

“We’ve only met twice, so I don’t know much more.”

Finally, Yuder gave up on extracting more words and responded with a feeling of surrender, causing Kishiar’s eyes to soften.

“But it seems my assistant views him quite favorably.”

“If I must say, it’s more that he seemed to view me favorably.”

Although Yuder was Kishiar’s assistant, he was only twenty and had just recently received a last name. He was a fledgling who had not even been in the Cavalry for a year, and the Cavalry was just beginning to stir.

Originally, it would have been impossible for him, a commoner, to assess a prince of a nation.

‘I suppose Kishiar would ask me such a thing…’

“This mission is not only to assist the prince but also to observe who he is.”

Standing in front of the bustling dining area, Kishiar responded in a voice so low it was barely audible.

“I will continue to observe whether he is a person who can bear the weight of the throne and keep his promise with His Majesty. He will likely be evaluating us in his own way as well.”

””

“So, be careful.”

Kishiar, who had lightly patted Yuder’s shoulder, entered the dining room first. The members and knights who were eating at the far end of the long table stood up and greeted him all at once.

“Have you arrived?”

“You’re late.”

“I was briefly reviewing the report I received. Please sit, I’ll continue.”

“Yes!”

Yuder followed him, taking a seat on the vacant chair next to Gakane. As Kishiar, who was at the head of the table, sat in front of the untouched soup and bread, Prince Ejain, who had been seated right next to him, gave a polite greeting.

“Regrettably, we started our meal without you.”

“Don’t worry, it’s not a formal occasion. I am concerned, however, whether these hastily prepared dishes will be to your taste.”

“No, they are incredibly delicious. Having left in such a hurry, I didn’t get to have a proper meal. Eating warm food after such a long time is like a balm to my fatigue. I am deeply grateful.”

Upon hearing Prince Ejain’s remarks, his retinue also expressed their gratitude.

“They would be pleased to hear you enjoyed the food.”

—

“I wonder how can it seem like a different world over there, even though they are just having a conversation?”

Kanna, seated across from Yuder, mumbled curiously.

“They’re eating the same food as us.”

“Do you think it’s because they can eat without making a sound?”

Emun, sitting next to her, with a full-faced smile, added.

“I would make a sound even if I were eating with a wooden spoon and a wooden bowl, but they are not making a sound at all.”

“I see… that’s true.”

“Yuder. Kanna got your soup and she put a lot of meat in it.”

Gakane whispered this as he listened to the conversation between Kanna and Emun.

“People don’t know. So eat a lot.”

At his words, the presence of chunks of meat became more palpable in the bowl. Yuder thanked Gakane in a whisper.

“Thank you.”

“No problem.”

Gakane muttered, seemingly embarassed, that it was hard to sneak in a lot of meat near the hungry Eldore siblings.

“I drew their attention, and Kanna carried it out. It was fortunate we weren’t caught.”

The rose-like vibrancy was back in his hair and eyes, perhaps because he had eaten well. Yuder vaguely remembered a story about him being nicknamed ‘Living Rose’. It seemed strange at the time, but it made sense now.

The meal ended not long after. After ensuring that everyone had finished their meals, Kishiar stood up and suggested going directly to the reception room to Prince Ejain.

“The largest space is there, so we should have our formal conversation there.”

“Understood.”

Yuder promptly followed Kishiar. With Nathan Zuckerman still absent, he had to guard the Commander. However, as soon as Kishiar sat in the chair arranged in the reception room, he gave Yuder an order.

“Yuder.”

“Yes.”

“Would you bring the map I left on the table in my room earlier?”

Yuder glanced at the Cavalry members who were following him in, nodded, and went upstairs. There was only one map in Kishiar’s room. The paper he had been studying so intently that he hadn’t even heard the door knock was still half-folded on the table. Yuder took it and went downstairs.

In the meantime, the conversation had already begun.

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“Therefore, it is highly likely that the route Prince Ejain suggested would be difficult to take.”

“To what extent is it…”

“Ah, just in time.”

Kishiar extended his hand to Yuder.

“This map shows the monster occurrence in the border areas, as reported by the Peletta Knight who has been stationed in the West.”

Receiving the map from Yuder, Kishiar spread it out on the table. Everyone could see the red area and scattered dots marked on the map.

“Do you recognize what the map represents?”

“Yes. It captures the bordering regions of the nations connected around the Great Sarain Forest.”

“Correct. Up to here is the western part of the Empire, this is Durban, next to it is Nelarn, below it is Aeril, and finally Hisnu.”

At Ejain’s words, Kishiar, nodding his head, mentioned each country adjacent to the Great Sarain Forest.

“Normally, around this time of year, we would have only seen a slight monster occurrence at the northwest end of the Great Sarain Forest, outside the western imperial border. It wasn’t until about two months had passed that we would see a significant rise in monster sightings within the border. But this time, the occurrence is much earlier than anticipated.”

His long finger swiftly traced over the marked red areas.

“There have already been several monster sightings near the fastest route to Nelarn. If they continue at this pace, the road will soon be blocked, and the monsters may completely overrun the western imperial border, making it impossible to reach that far.”

“…”

Ejain’s expression grew serious.

“I had heard of the numerous monster occurrences near Nelarn’s border. The anticipated damage seemed significant But to see them distributed evenly deep within the forest, this is the first time. Is this information confirmed?”

“The Peletta Knight has spent years eliminating monsters and gathering information throughout the Empire. We are confident that we are second to none in terms of relevant information. This map is a compilation of encounters with merchants, the Peletta Knight, and local residents who passed through the area.”

“This is quite troublesome.”

Ejain rubbed under his chin and sighed.

“Why must such a thing happen at a time like this”

“If possible, I would suggest you take a detour around the Great Sarain Forest, but that may be difficult.”

“I suspect it would be.”

Ejain furrowed his brow in response.

“I have informed His Majesty, the Emperor, but the reason I insist on passing through that dangerous area is that I have received news

of the deteriorating health of the King of Nelarn due to his chronic illness.”

The King’s worsening chronic illness. Its implication was simple.

From the moment the King’s seat is vacant, the fight for the throne, which had been brewing under the surface, would openly erupt.

Ejain nodded heavily, as if affirming the thought that crossed everyone’s mind.

“Although the King promised to bequeath the throne to me, the opposition is so fierce that he has not been able to fulfill his intention. Thus, I intended to consolidate my position with the approval of His Majesty, the Emperor of Orr, on this visit If I achieved my goal, but there is no position left to return to, everything will become impossible.”

Inside the Nelarn’s homeland, there was no one on Ejain’s side. His four brothers had allied to ostracize Ejain, who had demonstrated the most exceptional abilities, and the external assistance was too feeble to count on.

Ejain’s greatest allies had always been the common people and his subordinates, who had watched him up close as he used his abilities to triumph over neighboring countries in disputes. After the eldest Prince, whom the King had selected himself several years ago, passed away, the King averted his eyes from the political strife and quarrels among his children. He merely stated that if Ejain could quell the opposition of others on his own, he would grant him a place, but provided little in the way of substantial assistance.

And so, Ejain came to the Empire. If he could borrow the power of the Orr Empire, which Nelarn had once been a vassal to and still exerted a strong influence, it could help him claim his rightful place.

After succinctly explaining this situation, though not in great detail but enough for someone to roughly guess, Ejain stared intently at the red dots marked on the map with a furrowed brow.

“According to the last news I heard, my other brothers have already blocked all other routes,” he said. “They will use every means to ensure that I cannot return to the motherland before the King passes away.”

But the Great Sarain Forest was intertwined with many countries, so they could not completely block the path. Those from the Nelarn homeland who came to aid Ejain were already waiting in the middle of the forest, having arrived through other countries.

“Originally, I planned to pass through the forest by detouring along the borders of other countries in the middle…”

Even on the way there, they encountered assassins again. Ejain’s expression darkened. Kishiar, as if reading his mind, spoke up.

“Our information is leaking.”

“…”

“I suspected from the start that there would be no attacks near the destination, especially given how hurriedly we moved. There were no signs of information leakage from the liaisons we had shared with our side, so the problem is most likely on your end.”

“I think… you’re probably right.”

Prince Ejain admitted to Kishiar’s words. His attendants, who had been standing by his side, stiffened their shoulders all at once. A chilly, unreadable look passed over Kishiar’s red eyes.

“Which side do you think is the problem? Outside? Or inside?”

“What are you talking about? There are no traitors among us!”

A servant, unknown to Yuder, shouted tremblingly. The other servants also looked at each other with doubtful faces.

“…”

Ejain said nothing. Shadows flickered between the eyes of the young Prince, who was staring down at the map with his lips covered by his hands resting on his knees.

Yuder felt he might understand why the Prince had kept rattling on about some trivial connections between them on his way here, talking only about the Cavalry and the Awakeners. He was in need of power to save the situation, and talented individuals to be by his side.

‘Perhaps it was because I guessed that the wounded inner self that the Prince had briefly revealed when he said he was glad to have his life saved, wasn’t just from the anger of not being able to handle the monster himself, but also included this aspect.’

The reason he didn’t say what he originally intended to, even after going to the trouble of switching places with a servant, may have been a way to blind others’ eyes for safety, Yuder thought, feeling a sudden chill down his spine.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t be sure who has betrayed me. Everyone here was brought by me because I trust them. You, Commander, would know the weight of the people I chose to keep by my side out of the many who followed as messengers. The same applies to those waiting for me in the treacherous Great Sarain Forest.”

Ejain’s words transformed the expressions of the servants into a variety of shades. Kishiar also nodded as if understanding.

“Of course, I understand. Then, may we use another method to confirm?”

“…What method do you propose?”

Ejain lifted his head. Kishiar raised his hand lightly and pointed at someone.

“Kanna Wand.”

“Yes, Commander.”

“Is it possible?”

He didn’t explicitly state the details, just like when he had tasked Yuder with cleaning up after a battle. However, everyone in the group understood his intention.

“I can’t guarantee perfection. But… if you want it, Commander, I will certainly find even the smallest clue!”

The second Prince and his servants were taken aback by the confident voice that emerged from the seemingly ordinary, short-haired woman.

“Good.”

Kishiar made a polite request to Ejain’s servants.

“It won’t take long. Could you please comply with her for a moment?”

“Wha… What do you want us to do?”

One servant questioned with a slightly scared expression, but Kanna only gave him a smile, not a reply.

“I need an object that has been in contact with your bodies for a long time. I’m not sure what would be best. Any recommendations?”

“My Prince. Should we listen to this nonsense?”

However, Prince Ejain averted his gaze from his servant and responded.

“Everyone, hand over the tokens you brought from the Nelarn Palace. She said it would only take a moment, so that should suffice.”

“But, my Prince…”

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The attendants' faces were hardened, avoiding each other's gaze, hesitant, they only stared at the ground. The one who broke the uncomfortable silence was Melbon, the only one among the three attendants who had yet to speak a word of defiance to Prince Ejain.

"…If you truly believe there's no traitor among us, there's no reason to hesitate."

At his quiet voice, the other two attendants looked at him.

"We all swore to die for the prince if need be, that's why we came here. No matter what the prince does, he must return to Nelarn safely, and for that, we need their help. So, it's time to prove our loyalty."

Melbon reached into his pocket and pulled out a badge. The emblem was etched into a cloudy, milk-like gemstone, which at first glance looked similar to an accessory typically worn on a belt.

"…"

Yuder noticed that the hand Melbon used to hold the token was slightly trembling. It was impossible to tell if the trembling was simply due to nervousness, or if there was some other reason behind it.

Once Melbon took out his badge, the other attendants hesitated for a moment before doing the same. Kanna accepted the badge from the attendant who was on the far left. He was the one who had been defying Ejain's orders all this time, his face still clouded with doubt.

"What are you going to do with these?"

“We’re going to read the information embedded within.”

“Reading the information? What does that mean…”

Kanna didn’t explain further. Instead, she closed her eyes while clenching the badges in both hands. After a moment, Yuder noticed a faint, flowing energy radiating from inside her hands. As the energy, which looked like a heat haze, grew stronger, so did the strength Kanna put into her grip. Her eyelids fluttered.

A moment later, Kanna opened her eyes. A complex emotion briefly flickered between her furrowed brows.

“…This badge, it’s a token from the Second Prince, isn’t it?”

“Yes… it is. I received it… on the day I was chosen as the Prince’s personal attendant.”

The attendant stuttered out the answer.

“So it’s something you shouldn’t pass to someone else. Right?”

“…Isn’t that obvious? Anyone could guess that.”

“Then why did you hand over such an important badge to someone?”

“What?”

Kanna’s sharp blue eyes pierced the attendant’s face. The pale attendant gulped, blinking rapidly.

“I… I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve never done that.”

“You did. You gave it away and in return, you received something. Something written on a piece of paper…”

“Now, look here. It seems like you’re making things up, saying that you’re reading information. I’m not such an easy fool to fall for that. If you want to find the traitor, use a more credible method…!”

“The night before you left for the Empire, on a full moon night. At the end of the western corridor of the Balu Palace, in front of the blind sage’s statue. The land of Musetti! Are you still going to say you don’t remember?”

The attendant, who was about to shout to silence Kanna, froze at her following words.

“H…How?”

He was gasping for breath, his mouth agape.

“How do you… know?”

He stared in disbelief at Kanna, Prince Ejain, and his fellow attendants.

“Who, who told the Empire? Who is it? Who’s trying to trap me…”

He seemed to believe that Kanna had not read the information, but that someone had informed her about him. Cold sweat streamed down over the wide-open eyelids of the man who was frantically insisting on his innocence.

“Your Highness. It’s not me. Don’t trust the words of this Imperial agent. I am…!”

“Musetti was one of the regions where the next administrator had not yet been determined.”

Prince Ejain, who had been sitting with his body turned away from them, opened his mouth quietly.

“So, they told you they would give you the land if you betrayed me, Jenn?”

“No, Your Highness!”

The attendant, Jenn, shouted out straight away and shook his head.

“They did call me through Kindi the day before we left for the Empire. But as soon as I saw who was there, I immediately left without listening to a word! I’m innocent!”

“Then who is Dayla? Who is Dayla?”

However, Jenn’s outcry was soon halted by Kanna’s words that were heard again. While he remained silent, Prince Ejain responded slowly.

“It’s the name of Jenn’s wife, if my memory serves me right.”

“Ah…ah.”

Shivering, Jenn alternately looked at Ejain and Kanna. Kanna closed her lips tightly, then sighed and opened her mouth.

“She also borrowed this emblem. The reason was…to postpone your gambling debts in your stead with this emblem. You wanted to hide that. And it wasn’t a very old event. Isn’t it?”

“…”

“She said… the prince would never help with such a disgraceful matter.”

Kanna’s direct gaze targeted Jenn, who was retreating awkwardly with a pale face.

“Do you also deny this?”

“…Your Highness!”

Jenn, the attendant, covered his face and knelt.

“I…I said once would be enough. I was only asked to inform about who would accompany Your Highness before we left… But I was never… involved in this incident. That’s the truth…! Please believe me!”

In the end, he crumbled. His voice, filled with fear, flowed out in a confused manner. As Prince Ejain silently watched him, Kishiar swiftly signaled to Emun.

“Emun, you said it’s possible to temporarily trap a target other than yourself in darkness, right?”

“Yes. I’ll trap him.”

Quickly picking up on Kishiar’s intention, Emun reached out his hand. Then, from above Jenn’s head, a darkness like a falling veil covered him, swallowing even the screams he was making.

Everyone stayed silent as they observed the entity now concealed in darkness, invisible and inaudible, unable to recognize one another. After a moment, Prince Ejain cleared his throat and spoke.

“…When you mentioned the ability to read information, I doubted it. But I didn’t expect you to find it so quickly. Truly, an impressive ability.”

“I’m sorry, Second Prince, but the readings are still in progress.”

Kishiar responded without a change in expression.

“We were lucky that the first person turned out to be the traitor, but whether it was ‘only that one time’ or ‘from the very beginning’,

no one knows. You haven’t forgotten his words just now, have you?”

The first attendant, Jenn, claimed that while it was true he had betrayed them, he had not given any information that could lead to an assassin. If this was true, it meant there could very well be more traitors.

“…”

“Of course, if you believe it to be enough, Prince, the Cavalry will not move further.”

Upon hearing the cold statement, Prince Ejain’s eyes darkened. Various emotions flitted across his painfully neutral expression, but in the end, the prince made but one choice.

“…Yes, you are correct, Commander. I am embarrassed by my haste. I will continue to rely on your guidance.”

“Understood. Kanna, proceed.”

The atmosphere among the remaining two servants grew even heavier. Kanna too, seemingly feeling a stronger sense of burden, exhaled softly. She glanced between the two servants, then reached out her hand to the servant standing closer to Melbon. He hesitated momentarily, but then wordlessly placed his symbol into her hand.

Kanna used her powers in the same manner as before. As she read the information, her furrowed face heated up, beads of sweat forming.

“…”

After a moment, she opened her eyes, her gaze shifting to the second servant. For some unknown reason, he merely kept his eyes lowered, looking at the floor. Kanna, watching his face, bit her lip, turning her head towards Melbon to speak.

“…I apologize, but before I speak about the information I read from his token, may I also read the one from the person next to you?”

What kind of information could she have read from the second token to make such a request? Someone, unable to bear the tension, swallowed dryly.

“Pl…please do so.”

Melbon handed his own token to Kanna. A current of power, like a swirl of mist, shot wildly out of Kanna’s hand, now holding the third token. Her small hand shivered uncontrollably under the pressure, her eyelashes trembling.

“Uh…hoo, ha…”

A moment later, as the power finally faded, Kanna drew in ragged breaths. Her blue eyes, revealed beneath her eyelids, flickered with an indiscernible emotion.

She looked at Prince Ejain, who was currently avoiding her gaze, and then bowed her head toward Kishiar.

“…I’ve finished reading, Commander.”

“So, what did you learn?”

Kanna unusually hesitated for a moment. But she did not stop her answer.

“Each of the servants present here, for some reason, has passed on your information to others.”

“…”

A terrifying silence followed. All doubted their own ears at the unexpected answer. The servants, too, couldn’t utter a word.

“…Is that true?”

Kishiar, also seeming to think the result shocking, unusually reconfirmed the answer. Kanna nodded firmly.

“Yes.”

Her gaze shifted to the second servant.

“He had already given up before he gave me his symbol, so it would be better for him to speak directly.”

“…There really is nothing we can hide.”

The second servant, as if resigned, clenched his fist tightly. But when everyone’s gaze turned towards him, he immediately knelt before Ejain.

“I, Faity, have served you for a long time, Prince, and there was never a moment when I was not proud.”

“…Then why.”

Ejain quietly asked, avoiding the servant’s gaze.

“Why did you betray me?”

“It wasn’t betrayal. I only thought that if the direction of the path you were taking was wrong, I should correct it for you.”

The servant answered, tears streaming down his face.

“How could you possibly think of borrowing the power of the Empire, Prince? Even if you deemed it necessary, you could never truly rise Nelarn upright through that method. You, of all people, should not have done so.”

“So you handed over my information?”

“…I didn’t wish for Your Highness to be endangered. I thought if you met those who would moderately hinder you and failed, you would return to the right path. The appearance of the monster was an unexpected event… but now that things have come to this, I have nothing more to say.”

At a glance, his gaze still seemed to be filled with loyalty. Yet, the cold emotions hiding within were of a stubbornness and anger of a man who had failed to manipulate his lord to his own will. Prince Ejain closed his eyes as if in pain.

“…I always valued your audacity and kept you by my side. I explained the necessity of this journey to the Empire several times, and I thought everyone had accepted it. But this is how it’s repaid.”

“Haven’t I also repeatedly advised you out of loyalty? Dealing with the Empire is a dangerous proposition. If you had decided to face the other princes directly like before, I wouldn’t have had to go to these lengths!”

“And what of the innocent people of Nelarn?”

Prince Ejain countered with a dry voice.

“What about our citizens, exhausted from years of border conflicts and unstable politics, who’ve lost even the strength to fight? Knowing there is another way, should we sacrifice their lives for a meaningless battle among princes? Is that what you believe is right?”

“At this point, isn’t whatever I add just the hollow rambling of a traitor?”

The servant who had revealed his name as Faity hunched over and let out a laugh.

“Having failed like this, I will not have the honor of serving you again. Please… may you live a long and healthy life.”

The bowed servant seemed to tremble, overwhelmed by emotion. At that moment, Priest Lusan, who had been quietly observing the situation from afar, seemed to realize something and abruptly stood up and exclaimed.

“Hold on. Something is off. This person…!”

“Urgh, cough!”

But even before Lusan could finish his sentence, the servant coughed up dark blood and collapsed.

“He swallowed poison!”

“Quickly, turn him over!”

But by the time those around him rushed to turn him over, he had already breathed his last.

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Chapter 243

“Ah…”

The faces of the Cavalry members froze as they saw the face of the traitor who had died in an instant. Yuder stared down at the corpse that Priest Lusan was frantically examining, lost in thought.

‘He blustered about his loyalty till the end, but in reality, he used even his own death as a means to shake Prince Ejain. Its been a while since Ive seen someone this selfish… or perhaps, even this is part of the plot devised by Ejain’s enemies.’

In his past life, Yuder had encountered many individuals who veiled their crooked ambitions as loyalty, intending to shake their own lords, and even the whole country. Such people were not rare in the entourage of Emperor Katchian.

These types of individuals were loyal when their superiors followed the paths they desired. However, the moment things took a different turn, they would change their direction, claiming it was all for your sake, ready to tear your throat out. Even for someone with sharp eyes, it was no easy task to sift them out without the ability to read information like Kanna.

‘In that sense, Prince Ejain’s enemies have used their heads quite well.’

The moment Ejain decided to borrow the power of the Empire and the internal bonds weakened slightly, the enemies seized the opportunity to incite betrayal among his closest retinues.

Instead of outright inciting the Prince’s aides to betray him from the start, they targeted the weak points in their loyalty, a truly cunning strategy. The intention seemed less about killing Ejain and

more about causing internal decay, a clear sign of their thoughtful machinations.

Luckily this time, thanks to Kanna's presence, they were able to quickly pierce through the truth. But even if she hadn't been present, the Prince would have eventually needed to identify the traitor himself. They must have sown seeds of discord to ensure they could shake him regardless of who was caught.

Since ancient times, nothing could collapse an individual or a group more easily than internal betrayal. Even the strongest opponents were vulnerable to internal discord and attacks. That much was evident just by looking at Kishiar. Isn't the reason he almost sealed off all his powers, despite being as legendary as any, all due to internal issues?

'…Ah. I'm drifting off to that topic again.'

Yuder shook off the thoughts about Kishiar that had unintentionally surfaced.

While he was immersed in his thoughts, Lusan had finished examining the body. He closed the dead man's eyes, murmured a small prayer, and rose from his position.

"Priest Lusan. The cause of death?"

As Kishiar asked as if he had been waiting, Lusan replied with a stern face.

"As you all suspected, he swallowed poison. His left molar was discolored to a dark hue. I had only a moment to examine him, so I couldn't tell exactly what poison it was."

"The poison itself was something we all carried with us at all times. I never imagined it would be used like this."

Ejain slowly replied, looking down at the dead servant. His expression was unreadable, making it impossible to guess whether he felt anger or some other emotion.

“I see. Then there’s no need to investigate the poison further. For now, let’s clean up the body and move it elsewhere.”

“Yes.”

Without a word, the shadow clone of Gakane, best suited for such tasks, rose and moved the body. The only one left now was Melbon, who had kept his head bowed in silence the whole time.

“Melbon. Now, it’s your turn last.”

“…”

“Like the others, if you have something to say, say it.”

Finally, the Prince’s gaze turned to the last remaining servant. Melbon clenched his fists without uttering a word, but Yuder felt a complex mix of emotions deep within.

‘Could it be that he too handed over the Prince’s information…’

If he had even the slightest doubt about Kanna’s abilities, he might have thought that she had misread something. It was an outcome he had not anticipated.

The other two servants were people they had met for the first time today, but Melbon had been at the Prince’s side from the time in the imperial garden.

Even when they met again in the midst of fighting a monster, he had begged to save the Prince before even looking at Yuder, and he had been the first to reveal his token, which signified his loyalty. The

fact that even such a loyal servant had handed over the Prince's information was shocking.

Did the Prince truly have anyone he could trust around him? The more he saw, the more surprising and bitter it became.

"I…,"

Melbon finally opened his mouth. He raised his eyes to look at the Prince, who was scowling at him, and then lowered them again shortly after.

"I have nothing to say."

"Why not? I thought you would have the most to say?"

The Prince questioned softly with dark eyes.

"Because I can't understand your betrayal more than anyone else's."

At those words, Melbon's hands trembled slightly.

"You were more loyal than Jenn and Faity, and anyone else. You've been by my side for a long time, and you've even tried to sacrifice your life for me on several occasions. If you intended to betray me, you could have done so when I was powerless. A young prince sent alone to the border would have easily died with just a bit of tampering with his meals."

"…"

"Although you didn't show it, I believed that you would stay by my side until the moment I die. If there was anyone among my followers whom I could trust, I thought it would be you. But, were you betraying me too? Why?"

The voice devoid of high and low pitches felt more stinging, probably because the disappointment the Prince felt could vaguely be sensed.

“Was it money? Or was it honor? You don’t have a family, so you wouldn’t have been threatened. Did I ever treat you unfairly?”

Melbon kept his eyes tightly shut and said nothing. The Prince, who was waiting for an answer, finally showed a part of his emotion, perhaps out of anger towards him.

“Were your words about sending me to Nelarn safely also a lie? How little you must have thought of the ability of an Awakener who can read information to pull out the token with such confidence?”

“…”

“Answer me, Melbon. If you don’t want to embarrass me any further in front of everyone.”

“I…,”

Only then did Melbon open his mouth and answer with a stutter.

“What good will it do to say anything when it’s all over? However… I would like to say that what I said to Jenn and Faity was not born out of deceit.”

Melbon inhaled deeply and dropped to his knees.

“I never received any offers or threats from anyone, and Your Highness has never treated me unfairly. I didn’t know that Jenn and Faity were conspiring with someone. I regret and am upset that I did not realize this sooner, but…”

“I really… I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

A look of disbelief clouded the Prince’s eyes.

“Are you trying to insist that the Cavalry member’s claim about you handing over my information is a lie? That you’re the victim here?”

At that, Melbon fell silent again. A flash of pain flickered over Ejain’s eyes.

“Say it was about the money, say you didn’t approve of the path I was taking. What do you gain from deceiving me in this way?”

“I had no intention of deceiving you, Prince…”

“Then tell me, why the hell did you betray me!”

Melbon was silent for a long while. Yuder cautiously observed Melbon’s behavior, ensuring that a second disaster like the previous one wouldn’t occur.

As time passed with no response, Ejain, unable to hide his disappointment, finally turned his head towards Kanna.

“It seems I have no choice but to borrow your power once again…”

“The last time…I passed on the Prince’s information…was four years ago.”

Before the request for assistance was even finished, a frail voice emerged from Melbon’s mouth.

“The time when you, Prince, were able to leave the border and return to the palace… I had decided to quit my deceptive actions against you then. So, I… I am not innocent of the crime of betraying you, but I swear I have nothing to do with this recent incident.”

Ejain’s eyes widened. The others were equally shocked. If they didn’t believe him, it was merely a more detailed excuse, but

somehow, Yuder felt as though he was speaking the truth.

'…Come to think of it, wasn't what Kanna said simply the fact that 'all three of the Princes attendants had handed over the Prince's information for some reason'?'

Kanna hadn't confirmed that the timing and recipients of the information handed over by the Princes attendants were the same. Presumably, she hadn't been able to clearly read that part, hence the ambiguity.

The information Kanna read with her abilities was accurate, but not perfect.

It seemed the others also realized what Yuder had thought, their eyes wide with surprise. Kanna herself looked somewhat tense.

If it was not the case that all three attendants had handed over the Prince's information to the same person at the same time, and assuming Melbon's words were true, then even though his statement was covered by the information Kanna had read, it wasn't a lie.

"Four years ago?"

"…Yes."

"So you're saying that you had already been betraying me even before then? But no one considered me important back then, so who did you hand over my information to and when?"

Again, Melbon clammed up. Ejain watched him with a sharp and suspicious gaze.

"You're still alive, despite saying you had quit that job, which means one of two things: either the identity of the person is so shocking that you can't say it, or you've been forced to keep quiet about it."

“…”

“Which is it?”

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In the end, Melbon bowed deeply, laying flat on the floor.

“…It’s not hard to speak. I admit that I was off guard, not expecting the Awakener to read even that old incident, but at the same time, I also had a feeling that this day would come.”

Before revealing the truth, he hesitated, then managed to voice a single thought.

“However, I am… I’m concerned that due to today’s events, the Prince will face difficulties, only that weighs heavily on me.”

His words caused Prince Ejain, who seemed about to respond, to close his mouth helplessly.

Ejain must have sensed it. Out of all the attendants, Melbon was the only one who genuinely cared about him, not for himself.

“That’s not for you to worry about. Stop making excuses and just speak.”

“Yes, of course…”

Melbon, still bowing deeply, let out a long sigh, then hesitantly continued.

“In truth, I was a person who entered the palace with the purpose of observing and reporting on the Prince’s surroundings from the beginning.”

His confession was shocking from the start.

“But as I served the Prince, I increasingly wanted to devote my loyalty as a real attendant, and eventually, the thought of fulfilling my original purpose in entering the palace disappeared. Hence, from the moment four years ago when the Prince established a merit at the national border and returned to the palace, I completely severed my ties with them.”

“If they had the power to plant someone in the palace, wouldn’t they have let you go so easily?”

“I was prepared to deal with that much when I made my decision. And in fact, there have been no issues so far.”

Evidently, Melbon was not as unprepared as he seemed.

‘After all, despite the danger of revealing another traitor among the retinues, he took the initiative to provoke the atmosphere.’

Who, then, had planted Melbon in the palace? And why had they decided to keep an eye on Ejain from his youth, long before he showed his prominence?

“So, who exactly were those people who sent you?”

Ejain looked at Melbon’s face and slowly muttered names he speculated.

“You said it wasn’t the other princes, and those who would have been interested in me since my insignificant childhood… The third queen? Or Lady Marenta?”

“…”

“Count Blobs? General Kemel? Former Head Courtier Philiiamet?”

“…”

Despite saying it was during his insignificant childhood, the names that came up were seemingly endless. Ejain, who kept repeating unfamiliar names regardless of the changing expressions of everyone around him, sighed heavily and paused for a moment when no answer came.

“Could it be the King, my father?”

That was a name he seemed reluctant to bring up, in a voice filled with apprehension. And at that name, for the first time, Melbon also reacted.

“Was it really the King?”

“No.”

Melbon, still bowing, shook his head in denial.

“Really, it’s not.”

“Then what the hell are you saying?”

The Prince’s gaze hovered over Melbon’s head.

“It’s not this, it’s not that… Even if you were a spy for Durban, I wouldn’t be surprised, so just give me an answer.”

“…”

In that moment, the atmosphere surrounding Melbon changed. Although no words were spoken, everyone watching him knew something was amiss.

The fact that Prince Ejain had just pressed the answer was what had occurred.

“…Durban. Is it really Durban?”

Ejain asked slowly. Melbon's shoulders quivered.

"I apologize, Your Highness…"

All emotions washed away from Prince Ejain's face in a moment. He stayed silent for a long time, with his kneeling servant before him.

And at that moment, Yuder remembered a piece of brief information from his previous life that he had forgotten.

'Rumor has it that King Ejain of Nelarn's biological mother was executed for colluding with Durban.'

It was information he had read before meeting the young new King of Nelarn as Yudrain Aile, the second Commander of the Cavalry and the ambassador representing the Orr Empire.

Durban and Nelarn were two of the countries bordering each other, with the Great Sarain Forest in between, and their relationship was particularly bad. Small local wars happened almost daily along the border area for decades, so the sentiment between the two countries could not be worse.

It was known that King Ejain struggled as there were hardly any relatives to help him during his Prince days. If the information he just recalled was true, it was natural. The reason he, who should have lived enviously as the Second Prince, spent a long time in the harsh border area and returned, and why he struggled to gather internal forces despite his excellent abilities, was suddenly convincing.

What emotions would one feel upon hearing that a spy from such an enemy country had been placed by his side since childhood?

The reason this question, which he would not have thought about if it were someone else's problem, came to Yuder's mind was simple. He momentarily saw Kishiar and himself in the Prince, who was

extremely generous to his subordinates, and the servant who served him with a lie but eventually became sincerely loyal.

Yuder looked down at his hand, hidden inside the black glove. Kishiar did not hide anything from him, but Yuder was different. If weighed by the burden of the secrets kept from the one he served, there would be none heavier than him in this place.

Feeling uncomfortable as if a corner of his heart was scratched, Yuder turned his head. Around that time, Prince Ejain also seemed to have made up his mind and opened his mouth.

“…I believe we have uncovered all that needs to be discovered. Please release Jenn now.”

The Prince did not speak any further to Melbon. As he turned his body and asked Kishiar, Emun immediately absorbed the darkness and released Jenn, who had been trapped.

“Oh, Your Highness! Please, just… just one more time…!”

The man, drenched in sweat, trying to cling straight to the Prince, stopped speaking with a choked groan the moment he saw the body of Faity lying not far from the kneeling Melbon.

“Ah…. Ah.”

“Jenn, Melbon.”

Prince Ejain spoke to the servants with an unprecedentedly cold voice.

“Your punishment will be decided after returning to Nelarn. Until then, suicide and self-harm are forbidden, and if you try to escape, you will be killed instantly.”

A rigid wall formed over his face, which had been somewhat playful and humane until then. Surprisingly, that face was most similar to the face of King Ejain that Yuder knew in his previous life.

Jenn, seemingly deeming it difficult to change his lord's mind no matter what he said, slumped onto the spot and hung his head in despair.

"I do not wish to see your faces any longer. Leave."

Upon hearing the Prince's order to his attendants, Kishiar immediately gave a signal to his subordinates.

"Hinn, Finn. Lock them up in the upstairs bedroom."

"Yes. Understood."

The two servants were quietly escorted to the second floor, firmly gripped by the strong arms of the brother-sister duo who were more powerful than they appeared. Ejain kept his face turned away from them until the end.

"…I am deeply ashamed to show you such a sight after you've all traveled so far to assist me."

When everyone around had finally quieted down, the Prince stood up and bowed respectfully in front of everyone. The sight was more than enough to discomfort the Cavalry members, who were already at a loss on how to react to the Prince's overly revealed personal affairs.

"There's no need to worry about this incident leaking out."

Yet, Kishiar did not even blink and even smiled instead. When he gave a response to protect the Prince's honor and looked around at the Cavalry members, they all bowed their heads in unison, promising not to mention anything outside.

“Well then, may I ask how you plan to determine your return route to Nelarn?”

As if what had just transpired didn’t matter at all, Kishiar promptly changed the topic. His behavior could easily infuriate others, yet Prince Ejain merely responded with a weary smile.

“I am growing increasingly convinced that there is no other way.”

“So, you mean you intend to pass through the Great Sarain Forest without any changes in the plan?”

Ejain replied while looking at the western map still spread out on the table.

“Yes. I will return to Nelarn as soon as possible.”

“Hmm… even if the Cavalry decides they cannot assist due to the excessive risk?”

Kishiar asked, with a playful smile on his face. Yuder guessed that this was probably Kishiar’s way of testing Ejain.

‘It’s eerily similar to the attitude I saw when I took the Cavalry entrance test. It’s kind of nostalgic…’

“I am aware that the Commander and the Cavalry came to help me, not to sacrifice their lives. How can I force you to continue if you deem the journey ahead too dangerous during the travel?”

Ejain calmly responded, then after a pause, he looked straight into Kishiar’s eyes and continued in a slightly lower voice.

“In that case, I will proceed alone.”

“Alone, with the two treasonous servants?”

“Yes.”

“I have heard that you led many victories in a protracted local war with Durban through brilliant strategy, Prince Ejain, but doesn’t this sound like a reckless answer?”

“I might not know what the world thinks of me, but I am not someone with extraordinary abilities. I have simply never given up in front of an enemy.”

I have simply never given up in front of an enemy.

At that potent statement, everyone’s attention was instantly drawn to him. Ejain just stood confidently under that gaze. The Prince, who was neither an exceptional Swordsman nor a Mage and not even an Awakener yet, showed no signs of intimidation, even in a situation without his loyal servants by his side.

“That’s an impressive statement, but it doesn’t help with actual survival.”

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Chapter 245

“Yes, I agree. But if I refuse to give up and press onward, surely His Majesty the Emperor and Commander wouldn’t leave such recklessness unattended. I, being both foolish and cowardly, can only believe in that.”

‘What would Emperor Keilusa and Kishiar receive from Ejain?’

What could it be? It wasn’t just about choosing the most fitting person to sit on the throne of Nelarn to help, but receiving something in return? It was common for nations that have helped each other in times of difficulty to promise diplomatic, or military aid when things went well in the future. Yet, Ejain’s words didn’t seem to imply that.

Alternating his gaze between Ejain’s face, which was looking at Kishiar as if awaiting an answer, and Kishiar’s eyes that maintained a wall of silence behind a steady smile, Yuder pondered.

“I suppose I should retract my statement about recklessness.”

Kishiar, whose gaze had been studying the intentions of each other, responded in a much softer voice.

“Foolhardiness backed by sufficient calculation is not gambling, but rather a match. Indeed, Your Highness the Second Prince is worthy to be called a player.”

“That’s a generous compliment.”

At Ejain’s calm response, Kishiar bowed his head.

“No, if I said anything to upset you during our conversation, I apologize.”

Although he didn’t say it directly, it seemed that Ejain’s response was quite satisfactory from Kishiar’s point of view. Yuder thought, watching the light flash briefly over his red irises, that this man was truly unchanging in that aspect.

“There’s no need for concern. Given what has happened, it’s only natural for the Empire to confirm whether or not I’m a person who can keep promises.”

“Ha ha, it seems I’ve shown my hand.”

Kishiar let out an exaggerated laugh as if his inner thoughts had been exposed.

“Even though you’ve deviated from the original plan and came to help me personally, I’ve felt more than enough goodwill from the side of Orr Empire. No matter what happens, there will be no breaking of the original promise.”

“It’s a good start, with such warm words exchanged between us.”

With a cheerful response, Kishiar rose from his seat and approached Ejain.

“You must be tired if we are to depart at the break of dawn tomorrow, so please retire early today. Outside of the Second Prince’s bedroom and the room where the servants are detained, our Cavalry members will take turns standing guard all night, so there’s no need to worry.”

“Thank you for your consideration.”

The two men extended their hands once again for a handshake. Their meeting felt slightly different from the first time.

—

“I always thought being born a prince meant living happily ever after, but it doesn’t seem that way today.”

After Kishiar and Ejain returned to their respective rooms, the Cavalry members who remained in the reception room to sort out the guard shifts for the servants were noticeably less cheerful than before.

“How could all three servants be traitors? The Prince seemed like such a great man”

Upon hearing Emun’s serious murmurs, Gakane patted his back as a sign of consolation and agreement.

“Don’t take it too hard, Emun. We were fortunate to find out early and resolve the issue, thanks to Kanna. If we had remained ignorant, things could have gotten worse. The Prince probably thinks the same.”

“I suppose but it still doesn’t sit well with me.”

Sitting next to Emun, who was sniffling gloomily, Kanna didn’t have much of a cheerful expression either. Ordinarily, she would have comforted Emun along with Gakane, but for now, she just silently stared at the piece of paper on which the night watch order was written, her eyes dimmed.

After the night watch order was finalized, Yuder, still doing the cleaning up, stealthily approached the still dazed Kanna and struck up a conversation.

“Kanna, are you upset because of what happened earlier?”

“Oh…Yuder.”

Kanna looked at Yuder in surprise, but soon managed a faint smile.

“No, I’m okay. I’m not bothered.”

“If there’s something on your mind, don’t hold it in. Feel free to talk about it with anyone. It’s not good to have burdens, especially when on a mission.”

Despite her assurances, Yuder seemed not to believe her. Kanna, seeing the concern on Yuder’s face, fell silent and looked around. There were no colleagues within earshot. As soon as Yuder approached Kanna, everyone seemed to understand they were about to have a conversation and tactfully gave them space.

“…Did I look that serious?”

“A bit.”

“That’s strange. I used to hide such things well… maybe being in the Cavalry has made my facial muscles too loose.”

As she playfully patted her cheek, Kanna managed a slightly embarrassed smile.

“But honestly, it’s not because of that. It’s not unrelated… I was thinking about something else.”

“Something else?”

“Yes. About our Cavalry.”

Kanna gazed at the ground and let out a long sigh.

“When even the servants who have served the Second Prince of Nelarn for so long betray him, I wonder if the Cavalry will remain unscathed? I suddenly had such a thought.”

“…”

“Well… even if there are traitors, we may not be able to identify them, but the future is never certain, right? I remembered when the assassins came for our Commander… While they were unknown assassins then, we don’t know what might happen in the future… Ugh. I’m saying such unlucky things.”

Seemingly unhappy with her own words, Kanna scratched her head again and looked up at Yuder.

“Anyway, through this incident, I realized my ability still has much room to improve, and I need to work harder. Of course, I don’t like to doubt my colleagues who have been with me all this time, but I should make sure there are no gaps like today at crucial moments.”

Although her words were appreciated, Yuder remembered Kanna’s secret worry about her growing abilities, something she had shared only with him. Her ability to read information had been developing to the point where she could sometimes perceive the emotions of those around her, even when she didn’t want to. He remembered her confession, and how she looked at that moment.

Reading information is certainly a great ability, but Yuder didn’t want her to continue developing in a direction that caused her pain to identify a traitor.

This was a thought he would have found difficult to comprehend in his past life as Yuder Aile.

“You don’t have to do that.”

With such intent, Yuder replied softly.

“If it turns out there is such a person in the Cavalry, I’ll handle it before they get to the other members or the Commander.”

“What?”

“You saw it. Even that time you mentioned…”

In the place they had set out to recover the Red Stone, Kishiar had been ambushed by assassins, and Yuder had dealt with them single-handedly, with little difficulty. Of course, it was crucial to foresee information, but ultimately, if they couldn’t handle the situation right before their eyes, it was all in vain. And Yuder, more than anyone, was confident in that regard.

“So, you don’t need to worry about the Cavalry members.”

Kanna blinked at Yuder with an odd expression on her face. After a moment, her lips, which seemed to be about to say something, broke into a smile.

“Ah, you’re right. Here I was, fretting over unnecessary worries while we have you, the most capable of our members, assisting the Commander.”

He hadn’t said all that, but as long as Kanna looked brighter, it seemed to be alright.

With her concerns resolved, Kanna strolled leisurely back to her room. Yuder followed her, entered his bedroom, and, before long, encountered Nathan Zuckerman who had just returned.

“When did you arrive?”

“I just reported back to Duke after returning and heard about the events that occurred in the meantime. Since the Cavalry members is taking care of internal surveillance, our Peletta Knight decided to take turns guarding the outside of the quarters. So, if you need assistance, let us know.”

Nathan Zuckerman did not attach his personal opinion on the unfortunate incident involving Prince Ejain. It was a judicious action

fitting his character. After hearing Yuder's acknowledgment, Nathan went back outside for a late meal.

Yuder was left alone and rechecked his guard duty roster. His shift would be at the deep end of dawn, so it seemed like a good idea to rest early, if possible.

'…'

No sound reached him as he lay in the bed adjacent to the next room. Yuder recalled Kishiar, who had been so engrossed in examining the map earlier that he wouldn't have heard even if someone had called out to him.

He had told Ejain that if the journey to the Great Sarain Forest seemed too dangerous, he could choose not to go. However, if Kishiar was considering backing out that easily, would he have needed to scrutinize the map so carefully?

'I had thought that his decision to be part of the first dispatch team wasn't entirely because he said I was too reckless… It's clear he judged it to be a dangerous mission that wouldn't be an overreaction for all of us to undertake.'

Then what could Ejain have promised as a price to Emperor Kailusa and Kishiar?

It was something that probably did not occur in his previous life, so even if he tried to speculate, there was not even a slight hint that could help him guess.

Yuder looked at the old wall made of piled-up wood for a while before closing his eyes.

—

"Get up, Gakane. It's my turn now."

“…Ah. Is it already time for a shift change?”

As dawn arrived, Yuder who had opened his eyes immediately put on his outerwear, grabbed his sword, and stepped out into the corridor. Gakane, who was sitting half-asleep in a chair nearby, stood up energetically with a happy face.

“Why did you come so early? I could’ve done it a bit longer.”

“What are you talking about? You were dozing off because you’re tired.”

Wasn’t it Gakane who was tired because he used a lot of his abilities? Yuder, on the other hand, had been worried about his own body for being overly fine.

As he questioned with such intentions, a hint of redness spread over Gakane’s handsome face.

“Ah. Right. You came out earlier because of me? Sorry”

“You don’t need to apologize for this. It’s only natural.”

Gakane, who was usually a superbly built man that didn’t lose to anyone in terms of stamina, had a different issue when it came to fatigue from using his abilities. Since it was the first time he had used them so much in actual combat, his internal energy would have been greatly depleted.

“Go rest.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Yuder.”

After making a short report that no sounds had come from the rooms of the servants and Ejain during his guard duty, Gakane returned to his bedroom. Yuder sat in the chair where Gakane had been sitting and looked around.

‘It feels like it’s been a long time since I’ve done something like this.’

Staying alert alone wasn’t easy, but he had his own way of managing. Yuder spent the time vacantly, recalling the abilities he had used that day and thinking about his past training regimen.

Not long after, he suddenly felt a faint movement from inside Prince Ejain’s room.

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If anything were to happen, he was ready to jump in at a moment's notice, every nerve in his body on high alert. A moment later, the door opened revealing the room's inhabitant. Prince Ejain, with a slightly absent look on his face, slowly stepped out of the room. Spotting Yuder seated, he stopped in his tracks.

"…Is there a problem?"

Yuder, not having initiated the conversation, asked the question lightly while studying the prince's state.

"I woke up and found there was no water."

Under normal circumstances, before the prince even had the chance to seek water, his attendants would have catered to his needs. But the current situation was somewhat unique. Looking at Ejain's impassive face, now devoid of any attendants to fetch him water, Yuder rose from his seat.

"I can fetch it for you. You needn't leave your room."

"No need for that. I can fetch and drink it myself."

Yuder couldn't help but think that the prince was using the need for water as an excuse to escape the stifling confines of his room, his claim of waking up unexpectedly a likely lie. Using his abilities to fetch the water was simple, but if that wasn't what the prince wanted, he couldn't forcefully confine him to the room.

Yuder stood, alternating his gaze between the retreating back of the prince and the attendants' room, contemplating who to follow. If asked to choose between the prince and the attendants, naturally, he would gravitate towards Ejain.

“If that’s the case… I will assist you.”

“Despite me saying it’s okay.”

The prince headed towards the kitchen, where they had eaten dinner. His darkened gaze didn’t seek the water jug but roamed around aimlessly in the distance. In the end, Ejain stopped by a rain-streaked window, silently staring outside for a long time. Although the night was deep and the rain had almost ceased, the faint sound of drizzling could still be heard if one listened closely.

Just when Yuder was hesitating, wondering if Ejain intended to remain standing until everyone else woke up, the prince finally opened his mouth, murmuring low.

“…There’s a well outside.”

True to his words, there was a covered well right in front of the kitchen window. When Yuder offered no response, Ejain turned towards the small side door tucked in the corner of the kitchen.

Yuder debated if he should warn him of the danger outside or let him be, hoping the freedom would ease his troubled heart. Amidst this dilemma, he decided to follow the prince. Instead of dropping like raindrops, the misty rain that filled the air soaked their hair as soon as they stepped outside.

Yuder silently motioned with his hand to scatter the raindrops that were soaking their heads, causing Ejain to look back.

“…You don’t need a raincoat to block the rain either.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Having an assistant like you, the Commander must feel truly reassured.”

He wasn’t sure how to respond to that. When Yuder stayed silent, it seemed Ejain hadn’t expected a reply and turned his head back. He neither opened the well cover nor did he move elsewhere, just stood there, staring at it.

“Yuder Aile, are you aware that the history of Nelarn predates Orr?”

“No, I wasn’t.”

“The First Emperor of the Empire, after thwarting the Great Destruction and establishing Orr, forged an eternal alliance with the countries that had assisted him. They promised not to infringe upon each other and always help as allies. Though this alliance broke down and morphed into its current form due to becoming vassal states in later generations, remnants of the past are still scattered here and there in Nelarn.”

The languid voice merged with the gentle patter of rain, becoming a distant echo.

“Suppose… yes. Just like the statue of the blind sage in the palace of Nelarn.”

The statue of the blind sage was the spot that Kanna had identified as the meeting place where one of his attendants had conspired in betrayal. As the statue was mentioned, a cold, bitter smile briefly flickered across Ejain’s face before disappearing.

“The Nelarn believe that the sage is Luma, the Archmage who left the Empire. The Empire has denied it, of course.”

“…”

“I can’t verify the truth, but there are a few relics in Nelarn said to be left by the blind sage. I’ve promised to hand one over to Orr.”

His words flowed calmly, but their content was shocking. Yuder, curious all along, tried to gauge the thoughts of Prince Ejain as he revealed this fact. Finding no answers, he maintained his silence.

Perhaps it was his lack of surprise that prompted Ejain to smile.

“I see you’re not surprised. Did the Commander already discuss this with you? Or is this again that look of surprise you’re going to claim?”

This was a reference to something Yuder had said when they had met in the palace gardens. Yuder maintained silence for a moment longer, then shook his head.

“I was pondering why you chose to share this with me.”

“You’re the only one here who I can say I’ve known for a while. It’s good to have someone to talk to.”

“…”

“And you’re one of the few who look at me without pity.”

He had seemed indifferent to the attitudes of the Cavalry, but had he been aware all along? Yuder felt a little awkward as he made a small apology on behalf of his comrades.

“I apologize for their disrespectful behavior.”

“It’s okay. It must have been unavoidable. I understand. It’s been just as unbelievable for me, imagine how those observing must have felt.”

Ejain murmured casually and looked intently into Yuder’s eyes.

“The only reason I brought this up is that I had a question to ask, considering you also serve a superior.”

“What is it?”

Yuder took a step closer to Ejain to hear him more clearly.

“If someone stood in the way of the person you serve, what do you think would be the best way to handle it?”

The question seemed to stem from the words left behind by the now-deceased attendant. Yuder furrowed his brow and answered curtly.

“If it’s about what the one who died today said, I think it’s not worth worrying about.”

“Of course, I’m not bothered by his words. I followed the path I thought was right after much contemplation. I believe it’s better to negotiate with the Empire and progress towards peace more quickly, instead of clinging to relics that Nelarn doesn’t immediately need and risking internal conflict. But… if those who think I’m wrong continue to appear, what should I do?”

Ejain quietly responded.

“Unlike you all, I don’t have any power. My power comes solely from those who trust me. But if my decisions keep causing unnecessary conflict among them, won’t the path I want to take become even more distant? As a loyal subordinate like you, I wonder who you would want to serve and hence, I wanted to hear your thoughts.”

If that’s what he wanted, Yuder could give a satisfactory answer.

“Then there is even less need for you to entertain such thoughts.”

“Why?”

“Because it does not matter what choice you make.”

Ejain arched an eyebrow, as if asking what that meant.

“Is this some sort of reassurance… that such events won’t occur in the future? That’s not what I was asking about.”

“My response was not intended in that way either.”

“Then what?”

“I meant just what I said.”

Despite the odd sensation of elaborating to Ejain, Yuder tried to keep his answers as concise as possible.

“I have decided to believe that whichever path and whichever choice the person I serve makes, it is the right one. So, their choices, even when confronted with those who block their path, have nothing to do with me.”

Although he had always held these thoughts, voicing them felt strangely satisfying. He had started to believe in Kishiar’s path, his choices, because remembering his past experiences revealed they were far better than his own attempts, which had only resulted in failure and death.

How had their relationship, initially as dry as a desert, changed so much? Not just his physical form, but his thoughts, feelings, and values had all been entangled with Kishiar since that moment, and they were still evolving.

Ejain was silent for a while. His violet pupils, appearing black in the dim light, narrowed.

“Isn’t that too… blind? I may be the last person who should be saying this, but even those who stand above are not always right. Your words sound like those of a devout priest.”

‘Perhaps.’

Yuder responded internally to Ejain’s words. That doubt was indeed a tiny thorn forever embedded in his heart.

‘Is it normal to be so drawn to Kishiar? How can I be sure this choice is not a mistake?’

But the answer was always the same. Whenever he stood by Kishiar’s side and looked at him, he was reassured that his decision was right.

“I don’t think I am particularly blind. Surely, such people already exist by the side of the Second Prince.”

With such thoughts, Yuder gave another answer. However, Ejain, apparently finding his words empty, gave a small laugh and soon wiped his expression clean.

“That’s comforting to hear. I understand. It’s truly enviable to learn the Empire has so many treasures I cannot possess.”

After saying that, Ejain hesitated for a moment. A question, seemingly suppressed throughout, slipped out from him in a whisper.

“…But how can you trust the person you serve to such an extent? Is it because of the power they possess?”

‘So he’s talking about power again. Was that so important to him?’

Of course, power was important. In his past life, Yuder too had felt oppressed by Kishiar’s power and had no choice but to follow his words. But not anymore.

“I am sorry, but I do not wish to answer that. Not because your words are correct, but because I believe they should not be.”

At his cold response, Ejain blinked.

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Chapter 247

At the cool reply, Ejain blinked his eyes.

He possibly did not understand the meaning of Yuder's words, but it didn't matter. He didn't expect him to comprehend his intentions right away.

Having power didn't mean one could get everything they wanted. The best example of this was Yuder Aile's past life, which ended miserably. What was needed to gain something was sometimes not brute strength, but a gentle word or enduring patience. Among the Cavalry members, the majority had not yet seen Kishiar use his abilities properly.

It was a tremendous insult to everything he had suppressed and endured so far, and to what he had achieved in the end, for those around Kishiar to say they were following him merely because of his power and authority. At least, that's how Yuder felt now.

Was it because of power that they followed? There could be no more meaningless question than that.

"…Did I upset you somehow?"

Ejain asked, sensing that the answer was unusual. To be precise, Yuder wasn't angry but was feeling as though he was seeing his past self, so he shook his head.

"No."

He stared quietly at the young prince who was slightly frowning.

When Yuder first met King Ejain in his past life, he had seen him as an iron wall. He barely sensed any human emotion from his

expressionless face, surrounded by a hard wall, as he sat on the throne. He seemed less like a human named Ejain and more like ‘the King of Nelarn’ itself.

The people of Nelarn admired the young king who strengthened the country’s power and protected them, but they were always troubled. This was the case even though he had never committed any tyranny.

Those who had headed towards the diplomatic mission with Yuder said that such a character of Ejain was very similar to Yuder. Only now, facing the present Ejain and recalling those words he hadn’t cared about at that time, he somehow understood what they had meant.

Having realized this, a new concern flowed through Yuder’s mind.

‘Is it really for the best to let him follow the same path as in the past?’

Even if he safely returned to Nelarn, if he remained as he is now, it would be nothing but a repetition of his past life. Becoming the illustrious King Ejain might not be a bad outcome, but he didn’t feel it would be the best for him.

Once you believe that power provides all the answers, you eventually disregard everything else. But as a human being, you can’t ignore everything else in life. Even if you consider it fine, it ends up being a twisted, distorted life.

Yuder fell into deep thought for a moment. If he could let him know beforehand about the realities he had realized upon meeting Kishiar, wouldn’t he be able to understand that power isn’t everything even after awakening and gaining strength? It seemed much better than him not trusting those around him with a desperate and empty face.

‘It wouldn’t hurt to at least try.’

Knowing that there was still time until Ejain’s awakening made Yuder decide.

After hesitating for a moment, Yuder opened his mouth.

“Prince, I might be overstepping my bounds, but may I share a few words with you?”

“Go ahead.”

Ejain seemed to give consent in his reply.

“Your Highness desires the power to overcome the crisis, correct? What if, one day, you suddenly became an Awakener? Not just any Awakener, but one strong enough to not lose to anyone.”

“Are you predicting something right now?”

Ejain asked back with a curious look in his eyes.

“Do you also possess the ability to foresee?”

“I do not possess such an ability; I am just inquiring.”

A fleeting disappointment surfaced on Ejain’s face before quickly disappearing.

“Well, I desired it, but I never thought about it in detail. However, if I were to obtain such power… I’d probably be overjoyed. I’d be able to eliminate all the threats that have been causing trouble for me and Nelarn.”

Ejain sighed, the corner of his mouth lifting into a quick smile before returning to his usual expression.

“And what do you think it would be like after you’ve eliminated all these threats?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you believe that even more people will follow you, compared to now?”

That was an extremely direct and dangerous statement. Although it was said trusting in Ejain’s character, there was no guarantee that he wouldn’t take it badly.

However, it also served as the perfect answer to Ejain’s question, ‘Do they follow Kishiar because of his power?’

Yuder, sensing something, offered his last words quietly toward Ejain, who had tightly shut his mouth.

“If you cannot answer, please observe while you’re returning to Nelarn how I and others serve the Commander. That’s all I wanted to say.”

They did not continue the conversation and returned into the house. Ejain remained silent until the moment he entered his room.

The fact that he did not get angry at Yuder’s words seemed close to saying he would consider it. If, until the end, his mind does not change and he continues to believe only in power, it would end there. However, Yuder decided to hope that he would realize something.

—

“Sir Aile. I’ll be outside keeping an eye on the Nelarn servants and preparing the horses. Please escort the Duke and come out with the others.”

“Understood.”

The long night had passed and dawn had broken. The sky was impeccably clear as if it had never been cloudy. Yuder, taking Nathan’s place who had gone out first, headed again towards Kishiar’s bedroom.

“Commander, I am entering.”

After knocking and waiting a moment, he turned the doorknob. Kishiar, having readied himself from head to toe, greeted him.

“It seems time to depart.”

“Yes.”

“We’re leaving without having a proper meal. Aren’t you hungry?”

“That’s something I should be asking you.”

“I’m okay, but it doesn’t sit well with me thinking that my assistant is hungry.”

With his usual smiling face, Kishiar, in a playful tone, suddenly took out something from his pocket and handed it over. Surprised, Yuder took it and lowered his head to see a small candy wrapped in paper. Recognizing it as a product from a shop he had received from before, he identified it immediately.

“…Commander?”

“You haven’t eaten it in a long time, aren’t you starting to miss it? Have a bite first.”

“What do you mean? More importantly, when did you pack this into your luggage, seriously…?”

Im starting to miss it? What nonsense is that? I've never once brought it to mind. Yuder immediately shook his head, yet due to the insistent command to "absolutely put one in your mouth before you go," he had no choice but to open the wrapper and put a candy in his mouth.

Kishiar, seeing Yuder, who had fallen silent while sucking on the candy, looked incredibly pleased, a smile playing on his face.

"Is it good?"

"…It tastes the same as before."

"That means it's good."

Kishiar nodded satisfactorily and ruffled Yuder's hair. Yuder, surprisingly unperturbed, had grown accustomed to these abrupt acts. Humans truly were quick to adapt.

"But why are you really giving me this?"

"Didn't I tell you? I was worried you might get hungry."

Kishiar, who had been leading the way, answered lightly, turning his head.

"Or should I say that I am pleased you have brought the prince, who slipped out last night, back without any problem? Does that make you feel more at ease?"

Yuder unknowingly paused in his tracks.

"…Did you not sleep?"

"Don't worry. I did rest. However, I was just cautious, in case an abnormal situation arose."

Yuder began to wonder just how much Kishiar had been aware of from within the room. He wanted to believe that he hadn't overheard the conversation he'd had with Ejain, but he wasn't sure.

'I didn't have a conversation worth eavesdropping on… But I still hope he didn't.'

The problem was that it was Kishiar. As Yuder maintained his silence, suppressing the faint tremor in his heart, Kishiar added more detail.

"At first, I was concerned when he slipped out, but he returned not long after. I figured there was no need for me to go out too."

"…Yes. As you say, there was no major issue. He just went down to drink water and then wanted to get some fresh air, so he visited the well in front of the kitchen."

"I see. Even if he looks fine, his stomach will likely remain unsettled for a while. Be prepared to respond immediately without panic to any unexpected actions."

"I understand."

Fortunately, his concerns hadn't materialized. Yuder silently followed him down. Everyone was already prepared and waiting. Shortly after, Nathan, who had brought several regular horses and a small wagon with the Peletta Knights besides the Misty Wind Horse they had yesterday, approached Kishiar, bowing his head.

"Your Grace, you've arrived."

"Yes, Nathan. You've done well. It must've been bothersome to secure the horses and the wagon overnight."

"The others had prepared extra horses, just in case. The praise should go to them."

Only then did Yuder realize why Nathan had hurriedly left last night. Nathan handed the regular horses to the Peletta Knights, and placed two servants, whose hands were tied, into the wagon. They kept their heads bowed without any resistance.

“We will follow behind, watching over them. Your Grace, please proceed as planned.”

“Very well. No matter how quickly we move, we’ll be held up once we enter the great forest, so ensure you regularly check for the signals I’ll send from this side.”

The Misty Wind Horse that Nathan Zuckerman had originally ridden was taken over by Prince Ejain. After giving a complicated glance towards the wagon in which the servants were seated, Ejain promptly mounted the horse.

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Chapter 248

“From now on, regardless of how late we might be, our objective is to reach the western border area adjacent to the Great Sarain Forest within three days.”

Having verified everyone was mounted and ready, Kishiar, at the front of the group, calmly made the declaration, turning to face them.

“We have chosen the best route based on the information brought by the Peletta Knights who have been in the West, but unexpected circumstances will undoubtedly arise. This journey will probably be more difficult than any we’ve encountered thus far… but I trust in all of you.”

“Yes.”

There was a strange power in the word ‘trust’ that flowed from Kishiar’s mouth. Seeing no signs of struggle from anyone, and with their eyes shining in response, Kishiar reciprocated with a bright smile. He then flipped the hood of his cloak over his head to obscure his face, and raised his hand.

“Let’s set out.”

All at once, several horses surged forward in a thunderous gallop. The sunlight, just beginning to peek over the horizon, evenly bathed everyone from above. Due to this, Yuder had little difficulty noticing that Prince Ejain, riding nearby, was fixating his gaze on Kishiar’s back.

He could not determine what the prince was thinking, but decided to believe that the journey had started well.

—

In the heart of the western part of the Orr Empire, Baron Willhem, the lord of the city of Tainu, furrowed his brows as he read a letter hastily delivered by a courier from the capital.

“I may be a mere caretaker of someone else’s territory, but even so, as the master of the Willhem family who has long held responsibility for Tainu, Duke Tain’s behavior is too much.”

“What’s the matter, my lord?”

In response to the butler’s inquiry, Baron Willhem voiced his complaint loudly.

“Duke Peletta sends his newly formed Cavalry here, and still they haven’t arrived in the West. The Duke continues to berate me about their delay and their whereabouts. Given that their home base is in the Capital, wouldn’t it be more fitting for the Duke to personally look into this matter?”

“Indeed. How could the baron, busy as you are with governing Tainu, be expected to keep track of such trivial matters.”

Despite the butler’s placating response, the baron’s mood did not improve.

“Since the Duke announced that this Cavalry, or whatever they are, was departing from the Capital to the West, and requested me to look after them, it’s been nothing but a nuisance. What’s the big deal about them coming here to help us? Whether they come here and engage with monsters, whether they die or survive, why should I care?”

According to Baron Willhem’s understanding, Duke Tain knew nothing about the West, despite it being his own territory. The tedious task of ruling a vast territory was always left to others, while he himself would invest here and there, constantly issuing directives to release funds and handle the aftermath.

Not long ago, due to the preparation for a massive investment trade initiated by Duke Tain, everyone in Tainu was worked to death, unable to focus properly on governing the territory. And yet, the Duke leisurely went to the South to initiate another maritime investment, and then returned. Although there was no compensation reaching Willhem's hand for his trouble, he was always troubled because of Duke Tain, and thus, his feelings toward the Duke's family were quite negative.

"What's truly important to him is whether the recent monster outbreak will impact his investment points in the Great Sarain Forest or not. The Cavalry issue is merely something he is bothered with, and he just wants to vent his frustration through me."

Baron Willhem, who had accurately pinpointed Duke Tain's true intentions, angrily crumpled the letter and threw it away.

"They haven't found the culprits yet, but once found, they will certainly deal with them. Tell them that we have dispatched a significant number of mages and knights to protect our investment base," the baron instructed.

"Understood."

The butler picked up the crumpled letter, intending to pen a response on behalf of the baron. As he read, his eyes momentarily paused at one spot. It was where the name of Duke Peletta was written.

"But my Lord," he ventured cautiously, "According to the courier who brought the letter, Duke Peletta, who established this Cavalry, has been declared by the Emperor as the new owner of the Divine Sword. Could that really be true?"

"The Divine Sword Orr?"

Baron Willhem, his voice a low grumble, muttered the name of the sword. He laughed coldly as if dismissing some absurdity.

“Even though I’ve never set foot outside of Tainu, I’ve heard plenty about Duke Peletta. How could a man known for his ineptitude and love for pleasure, who is constantly embroiled in imperial scandals, be the owner of the Divine Sword?”

“Then…”

“Obviously, the Emperor made the statement to bolster the imperial prestige. Who would believe such a thing and demand confirmation from Duke Peletta? Would they even show any proof? The Divine Sword isn’t something anyone can just touch, its appearance is hardly known.”

Whether Duke Peletta was the true owner of the Divine Sword or not, there was nothing to gain from the perspective of the Four Great Dukedoms. Even if Duke Peletta was proven not to be the owner, his reputation would not suffer greatly. On the contrary, if a new owner of the Divine Sword truly emerged from the imperial family, it would increase the Emperor’s power and cause headaches.

“Naturally, it’s best to ignore such absurdities. Hence, I’m sure the Duke of Tainu wouldn’t mention it in his letter. Only ignoramuses like you who still believe in old tales would be swayed by such news.”

“Indeed, you are wise, my Lord, even from within Tainu you see the entire continent.”

The butler bowed deeply, greatly admiring his master’s wisdom. Baron Willhem seemed slightly appeased by his servile attitude.

“It’s easy enough to understand if you think about it. Now, what about the Western Mage Union we contacted? I heard they’re not being very cooperative with the monster extermination.”

“Aren’t mages always like that? Unless a monster appears at their doorstep, they consider it none of their business.”

“Despicable lot. They don’t even know they’re living comfortably thanks to others!”

“I’ve mentioned several times how critical the situation is, but they don’t budge. It seems they’re still resentful about the incident with our soldiers, hence their stubbornness.”

“Still upset about that incident? So now, as the Lord, do I have to side with them? Just because they can use some magic, they act all high and mighty!”

Baron Willhem spat out a curse. He paused, mulling over the issue, before a solution came to mind.

“Alright. Then we’ll have to deal with two matters at once.”

“What do you mean, my Lord? Please enlighten this fool as well.”

“Tell those mage union bastards that we’ve decided to get help for this extermination from others, so we no longer need the mages. Also, let them know that we’ve noted their interest in that so-called Magic Spring in the Great Sarain Forest.”

The butler was greatly taken aback by the plan. He momentarily fell silent with a worried expression, unusually countering his master’s words.

“Will it be alright? Haven’t those individuals been staying in the West this whole time to study it? If they find out it’s a lie, they will be extremely angry”

“How foolish indeed. Even if they belatedly realize it’s a lie, by then the handling of the monsters in the Great Sarain Forest will be finished. Do they dare to protest against me if they wish to continue

their research there? At most, they'll grumble and debate about whether to cooperate, just like they're doing now."

If the Cavalry members truly came, they were bound to encounter the mages who had been researching in the borderlands and Great Sarain Forest at some point. If they misunderstood each other and fought fiercely, from the viewpoint of Baron Willhem, he could sit back and watch without lifting a finger.

'It would be even better if they can help with the monster extermination while they're at it.'

He had no expectations of the Cavalry members. He was also completely unaware that Duke Peletta had already entered the West, not being in the capital currently.

Even if he had known beforehand, the baron's decision wouldn't have significantly changed. Things were going smoothly according to his will.

The mages of the Western Mage Union who had secretly accessed the incorrect information spread by the baron that day were extremely angry as expected, and their leader Micalin Punt, unable to contain his fiery temperament, headed straight to Great Sarain Forest.

Among the mages, there were those like Thais Yulman who only harbored curiosity for the Awakeners, but there were also many who had a sense of caution, fearing that their future positions might be taken away. Micalin was a faction that disliked the Awakeners more than anyone else.

"So, the mage bastards have finally made a move? Everything is going well! We don't even have to use our own forces, and this extermination will more or less be resolved."

Baron Willhem laughed heartily, feeling as if a thorn in his side had been removed. It was a laughter he would not have indulged in if he had known how his trap would unfold.

—

“I think I can see Great Sarain Forest in the distance.”

During a short break, Gakane, who could share his sight with his shadow clone, mumbled with his eyes closed, having sent it out for reconnaissance far in advance.

“I see a forest that looks like green waves from afar. Once we reach the next village, we’ll be right there.”

“How about the monsters? Do you see any?”

“Not yet… Ah, but I should stop now.”

When Kanna asked, Gakane answered and then opened his eyes. The shadow that had disappeared beneath his feet reappeared. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and let out a long sigh.

“Phew, it’s not easy distributing my energy.”

“Still, you’re developing much faster than when you were only in the academy since you’re using it constantly in real situations.”

Yuder offered words of praise to Gakane, whose eyes were tired.

“You kept it going much longer than yesterday.”

“Really? You think so?”

Gakane, whose face brightened as if he hadn’t been tired, smiled widely.

“I’m relieved. I feel like I’m pulling my weight. I was really worried before we came here.”

Although he was doing his part regardless of what anyone said, he didn’t think so himself. Despite appearing cheerful because of his frequent hearty laughs, Yuder knew Gakane had an immense desire for improvement and perseverance within him.

‘Once this mission is over, he’ll be useful anywhere. Then… maybe I should ask him if he wants to work directly under me.’

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Chapter 249

Kishiar’s gift of five direct subordinates and the privilege to select collaborators was still intact, unused even once. Until now, the only person Yuder had considered for this role was Enon, but it seemed appropriate now to add Gakane to the list.

‘The condition was someone from the Cavalry, not at the level of a Deputy Commander, so there should be no issues.’

More importantly, Gakane’s shadow clone ability suited very well with the plan Yuder had vaguely conceived of nurturing subordinates mainly for information gathering. His distinctive appearance was somewhat of an issue, but that seemed manageable.

“Yuder, what are you thinking about so seriously?”

“Nothing, really.”

Yuder shook off his thoughts at Kanna’s call and turned his head. Just then, Kishiar, who was sitting beside him, lifted his eyes from the note he was writing for Nathan Zuckerman, who was following behind. Their eyes met.

Even with his face half concealed by the cap attached to his cloak, the man’s striking beauty couldn’t be fully hidden. He gave Yuder a slight, mischievous smile.

‘Ah.’

The soft smile, like light peeking gently out from between the clouds for him alone, caused Yuder’s heart to sink for a moment without him even realizing why.

However, before he could figure out what that feeling was, Kishiar's smile vanished as quickly as a mirage.

"Prepare to set off again."

"Yes."

No one suspected the exchange of glances between the Commander and his assistant. They mounted their horses. Kishiar tied the note for Nathan to a nearby tree branch, left a symbol only the Knights of Peletta could recognize, and turned around.

"Gakane. Was there anything unusual in the reconnaissance?"

"No."

As Gakane promptly responded, Kishiar nodded.

"That's a relief. It doesn't seem like there has been any unusual surge of monsters in the imperial border yet… From now on, we must rush without rest until we reach the Great Sarain Forest."

They had crossed countless shortcuts to reach the border region, where the Great Sarain Forest was located, within three days. The Misty Wind Horse had displayed its full potential, charging relentlessly even through the swampland where an ordinary horse would have been stuck and died, and through the barren mountains where direction was hard to gauge.

Having come this far, everyone's faces were pale from exhaustion, but they knew the real challenge was yet to begin, so no one complained. They followed Kishiar toward the western border, where the entrance to the Great Sarain Forest began.

"This place is definitely… completely different from before."

The last town before the Great Sarain Forest was bustling with merchants from other countries who had passed through and mercenaries who ventured into any dangerous places. The variety of people was so great that even the Cavalry members riding Misty Wind Horses did not attract attention.

As they headed toward the meeting point arranged with the Knights of Peletta, Priest Lusan looked around anxiously and whispered,

“There are too many armed people. I can smell blood from everywhere…”

“Out of the way! We have to pass!”

Just then, a group of people who appeared from behind Lusan yelled harshly. If Yuder hadn’t instinctively pulled Lusan away, he would certainly have been knocked down by them. Without looking back, whether Lusan staggered or not, they hurriedly rode their carriage carrying a person down the alley and disappeared.

“What? Just like that, they left without an apology. Are you alright, Priest?”

“Ah, yes. I suppose it’s my fault for letting my guard down. I’m alright. Ha ha… Thank you, Yuder.”

“It was nothing.”

While Emun was gaping at Lusan, stunned, Yuder recalled the attire of the departed group. At a glance, it was a common, rough robe, but some of them wore pearl brooches on their chests.

‘A pearl brooch on a robe that mages usually wear in such a dangerous place.’

There was only one thing that could mean: they were either mages from the Pearl Tower, or they were somehow affiliated with it.

He was curious why they would dash off carrying an injured person, but since they had already disappeared, there was no way to find out. Yuder resumed moving on with his group. Not long after, they once again ran into robed individuals arguing loudly in front of a small house.

“Why can’t you do it? I can pay!”

“I told you several times that the priest collapsed from exhaustion. We don’t have any holy water or anything!”

“Weren’t there other priests? That one, he…”

“He left yesterday because the situation here was too dire. You need to go to a regular doctor, or perhaps a village nearby.”

“This can’t be happening…”

Despair settled over the faces of the dismayed group. Watching their despair, Kishiar paused and turned to look at Priest Lusan.

“They seem to be in quite a rush. Priest Lusan, shall we go over?”

“Yes, yes. Of course.”

Despite them almost knocking him over earlier, Lusan agreed without hesitation. Seeing this, Kishiar, who seemed to have expected as much, instructed Gakane to accompany him.

“Gakane, go with him.”

“Understood.”

They approached the individuals who were discussing something in front of the closed house, with the injured person lying between them.

“Um, excuse me…”

“Don’t bother us. Just move along. This isn’t a show!”

Lusan flinched at the angry response, so Gakane stepped forward in his stead.

“This man is a Priest of the Sun God. He came over because he was worried about your injured friend. You’re all overreacting.”

At that, everyone turned to look at them.

“And you expect us to believe that now? Even the priest we had ran away. What a lie…”

The rude speaker, upon locking eyes with Gakane whose youthful appearance exuded an undeniable aura of trustworthiness, stopped midsentence.

“…”

For a moment, their anger was replaced with shock. Then they saw the young Priest beside Gakane, the aged holy emblem around his neck, and they all let out a cry in unison.

“No way, are you really a Priest?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“By God! I will believe again! Please, check on him!”

“Ah, alright. First, could you tell me how he got injured…”

The robed figures hurriedly escorted Lusan to the injured man, each explaining in a rush.

“We are mages affiliated with the Western Mage Union under the Pearl Tower…!”

“The research facility in the Great Sarain Forest…! Suddenly, monsters…!”

“The array we had set up is acting strangely and collapsing…!”

The voices overlapped making it hard to discern exactly what was being said, but Yuder could hazard a guess. He looked at Kishiar who was watching the situation with interest and muttered.

“It seems like monsters are appearing in this vicinity.”

“Yes, it appears so.”

Because of the mages crying out that there wasn’t even time to move, Lusan immediately knelt down where he stood and used his divine power to heal the wounded person who was laid down. The wounded man had severely crushed limbs, and his forehead, swathed in a bandage, was soaked in blood. As Lusan poured out white light without restraint until the mans pallor improved and his breath steadied, the mages collectively expressed their admiration.

“Wow. This is the first time I’ve seen a priest using such powerful divine power right in front of me…”

“Could he be a senior-level Priest?”

“No, why would such a person come here?”

“Um… perhaps hes been sent as support from Tainu…?”

“Ah….”

As the mages' opinions diverged, Lusan finished the treatment and rose from his spot.

"I've put out the immediate fire. The broken limbs have all been healed, so if you rest him at a general ward, he should be able to regain his strength."

"Thank you so much, Priest. I don't know how I can repay this favor… I apologize for my earlier rudeness."

"No problem. But has the situation in Great Sarain Forest become that dangerous?"

At Lusan's question, the mages blinked and looked at each other before responding.

"Of course it's dangerous. Didn't you know that when you came? Aren't you a Priest from Tainu?"

"Ah, I knew about it… but I didn't come from there."

At Lusan's awkward reply, the mages' eyes widened in surprise.

"Then why on earth did you come to this dangerous place? If you came with the intention of passing through the forest, we would advise against it. We tell you this for your own good, no matter how strong you are, if you go there now, you really might die."

"That's right. If we didn't have a purpose, we wouldn't want to go back in there either. The situation this year is too different from the previous ones, and it's difficult to deal with the creatures that keep appearing, which we've never seen before. We've seen veteran mercenaries go into Great Sarain Forest and come out dead several times already."

"It's just a rumor among the merchants, but there's even talk that a curse has been laid on Great Sarain Forest. That says it all!"

“Ah… I see.”

Lusan, who had been listening to the steady stream of talk, looked in the direction of Kishiar and Yuder with a troubled expression. The mages, as if only just realizing there were other people present, looked surprised and became cautious.

“Who are you?”

“We’re with the Priest.”

After checking that Kishiar and Ejain had their caps well pulled down, Yuder stepped forward.

“We were planning to head straight to our destination once the treatment was finished… but could you tell us more about the situation in Great Sarain Forest if it’s not too much trouble?”

“You’re with him? Where are you from?”

“We’re a group of knights and mercenaries dispatched with a mission to enter Great Sarain Forest.”

“Knights and mercenaries?”

The mages, their faces a mix of suspicion and curiosity, scanned the faces of everyone present. Their gaze ultimately rested on Gakane.

“So, you must be the knight then. The leader?”

“…Haha, yes.”

Gakane awkwardly acknowledged, having caught Yuder’s cue.

“Alright then. Follow us. You saved our colleague’s life, so the least we can do is offer some assistance. We’ll invite you to where we’re staying for a moment.”

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Chapter 250

The place the mages had directed them to was an old building erected at the edge of the forest that extended from the Great Sarain Forest, visible right at the proximate distance.

“This place is merely a temporary facility for resupply, not much to look at. But please, do come in.”

As the mages entered with the injured carried on a stretcher, a few others inside hastily rose and rushed towards them.

“What happened? Did you meet the priest?”

“Is the holy water still there?”

“And who are these people?”

Despite their disheveled appearances, as if they had run here in the midst of a battle, their concern for their comrades seemed sincere. The mages who came with the injured on the stretcher looked at the Cavalry members with bright faces as they moved the stretcher toward the bed.

“The old priest was exhausted and had no strength left, the young priest ran away, and they even said there was no holy water left. I thought a real disaster was upon us. But then, these folks happened to pass by and helped.”

“What?”

“That man over there turned out to be a very capable priest.”

The mages breathed a sigh of relief at the news that Lusan had quickly healed their injured comrade, and moreover, had asked for

no recompense. They dropped their guards and bowed their heads to express their gratitude.

“Good heavens, thank you so much, priest!”

“You used such great power to save a dying man, how can you not accept anything in return? Please bill us, the Mage Union, whatever the cost! We are not stingy about such matters!”

“No, no… I am simply glad that I was able to help where needed. The divine power is a gift for helping others, how could I accept a fee for it.”

Having been cooped up for a long time in the temple without the opportunity to use his divine power, only enduring oppression, Lusan was deeply moved by the direct and passionate gratitude. As he waved his hand to say it was okay, the mages opened their mouths in astonishment.

“No way… I thought only priests who heal minor wounds while charging exorbitant fees existed, how can there be someone like this…”

“I’m going to start going to the temple again from today. I will be a sprout of God once again, so don’t try to stop me.”

“What? How can you do such a thing after becoming a mage? I’ll be the first one to go repent, so let’s not meet in the same temple.”

“Everyone, be quiet! The priest came here because he needs to go to the Great Sarain Forest and wanted to know how the situation changed rapidly.”

The mages are generally talkative, but the situation was even more serious now that their comrade, who was near death, had been revived. After laying the injured on the bed and checking his

condition, it wasn't until one mage raised her voice that they finally kept quiet.

"I'm sorry, we've been fighting monsters since this morning and just managed to escape, so everyone's still quite excited. Anyway… the injured need to rest quietly, so it would be better if we go elsewhere to talk. Please follow me."

With a tired face, she opened the door and led them to a larger space. Several mages naturally followed, standing around as if to guard the perimeter.

"My name is Lorna Beit. I've been a mage in the Western Mage Union for 15 years now. I'm the most experienced person here, so would it be okay if I represented everyone and explained the situation?"

"Of course."

As Gakane responded, the mage who had introduced herself as Lorna smiled.

"As I mentioned earlier, our Western Mage Union has been conducting research in the Great Sarain Forest for several years, so we are familiar with its dangers. Not once has our heavily fortified research base suffered from monster attacks. Well, not until this year."

"Is the situation that serious?"

Hearing the question, Lorna's expression grew grave.

"I'm not sure if you're aware, but over a month ago, reports of heavy damage began to emerge from the countries adjacent to the Great Sarain Forest. Even then, we thought lightly of it. We assumed those countries, with their unstable politics, were ill-prepared and suffered damage as a result, but we would be fine."

There were still a few months left before the monster outbreak period, during which monsters would invade the empire en masse, according to past records. The mages anticipated that, as in previous years, they would be safe if they culled the surrounding monsters before the most dangerous period arrived.

“However, reports of sightings of unprecedented monsters started coming in from the Great Sarain Forest region within the Empire a short while ago. As rumors spread, the land trade routes began to destabilize. The border lords, facing a crisis, requested support from the Tainu lord, the ruler of the largest city in the west. But, there were problems on that end as well.”

The Baron of Tainu, Willhem, was notoriously stingy. Despite knowing that he had to deploy forces for monster culling every year in the west - a region with frequent monster outbreaks - he was reluctant to offer his troops. Hence, he forced the Western Mage Union to assist, but the mages, who didn’t have a good relationship with him, were equally reluctant.

“The lord of Tainu had been using the power of the Western Mage Union at his discretion in exchange for allowing us to conduct research in the forest. We were all angry, for we were collaborators, not subordinates, yet for years we were made to cull monsters in their place.”

The mages had decided that this year they would give the Lord of Tainu a taste of his own medicine. As they squabbled and sought help from their respective homes and the Pearl Tower, the number of monsters appearing at the border regions swelled rapidly.

“As we were busy dealing with Tainu’s lord, and ordinary citizens fled due to increasing casualties in the forest, the monster numbers grew. Our leader was so angry that he left Tainu’s base and came here.”

“I see.”

“And then this morning, it all blew up.”

Monsters suddenly appeared in the heavily fortified base of the Western Mage Union, which was protected by over a hundred large barriers. After several hours of battle, the monsters were defeated, but many barriers were destroyed, parts of the buildings crumbled, and many mages were injured.

“Fortunately, there were no fatalities but the condition of the colleague that the priest treated earlier was very serious. That’s why we rushed to this village where two priests were stationed Yes, that’s how the situation unfolded.”

Lorna’s tale, even for Yuder who already experienced the situation of the Western Monster Subjugation in his previous life and knew what was to come, was immensely intriguing. The long-standing conflict between the Western Mage Union and the Lord of Tainu had affected the initiation of the subjugation mission. It was information he could never have known if he hadn’t come here.

‘Back then, I thought everyone was simply protective of the Cavalry…but there was already discord amongst them.’

“Actually, the reason we initially thought you were a priest from Tainu is because of that,” Lorna confessed, with a laugh that echoed through her nose, as if finding her own words amusing. “We thought the Lord had finally realized the seriousness of the situation and started sending support.”

“It’s unlikely that miser would ever do so!”

She once again expressed her gratitude towards Lusan.

“It really was a blessing that you came when you did. They probably had a good laugh at our expense as soon as they heard the news.”

“So, do you plan to simply heal the victims in the Western Mage Union and leave?”

The one asking the question was not Gakane, but Kishiar who had been quietly listening from behind. His voice was unexpectedly pleasant; it was so deep that it made him appear more imposing, especially with his face hidden under his hat. This fact surprised some of the mages, who gave him a fresh look.

“Hmm, that’s still under discussion. But I think we probably won’t leave completely. There are many who can’t leave their research bases… above all, our leader is vehemently opposed to it.”

“Even if it becomes more dangerous than it is today, you still plan to stay?”

“If we were going to back down because of danger, we wouldn’t have come here in the first place. We mages are like that. We are a species more concerned with finding the answers to the future than with the immediate dangers.”

Lorna bowed her head slightly and gave a small smile at the corner of her lips.

“Are you worried about us by any chance? We’re more concerned about you. Are you still planning on going to the forest after hearing all this?”

“Yes, we have to go.”

“That’s serious. After receiving such great help, it’s only right that we should help in return…but we’re short-handed ourselves at the moment.”

Even experienced traders and mercenaries who frequented the Great Sarain Forest suffered substantial damages in just a few days due to unpredictable monster appearances. Lorna wondered what

kind of purpose drove those who insisted on advancing in spite of the dangers that even the mages who had lived there for years couldn't avoid. Yet, out of respect for their benefactor, she swallowed her curiosity.

"You don't have to help us."

"No, we can't just do nothing…"

Lost in thought, Lorna suddenly turned her head and made a suggestion.

"Hmm… Some of us are planning on returning to the base soon, would you mind accompanying us at least that far? The place where our base is located is still probably the safest."

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